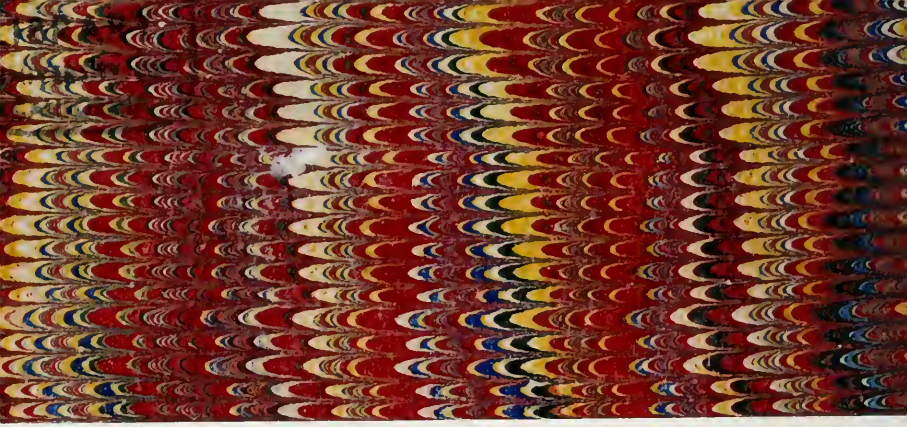

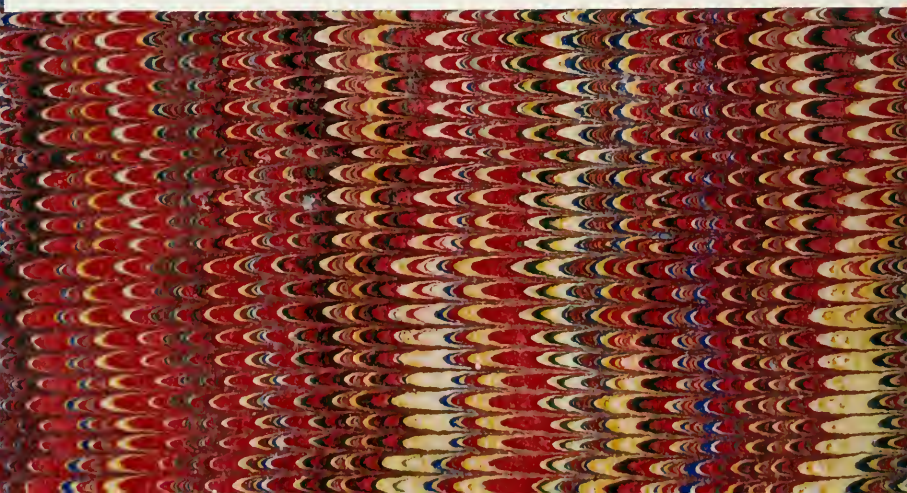

THE

BELTON ESTATE.

BY

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"CAN YOU FORGIVE HER?" "ORLEY FARM," "FRAMLEY PARSONAGE," ETC., ETC.

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CONTENTS OF VOL I.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAPTER X.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BELTON ESTATE.

CHAPTER I.

THE REMNANTS OF THE AMEDROZ FAMILY.

Mrs. Amedroz, the wife of Bernard Amedroz, Esq., of Belton Castle, and mother of Charles and Clara Amedroz, died when those children were only eight and six years old, thereby subjecting them to the greatest misfortune which children born in that sphere of life can be made to suffer. And, in the case of this boy and girl the misfortune was aggravated greatly by the peculiarities of the father's character. Mr. Amedroz was not a bad man,—as men are held to be bad in the world's esteem. He was not

vicious,—was not a gambler or a drunkard,—was not self-indulgent to a degree that brought upon him any reproach; nor was he regardless of his children. But he was an idle, thriftless man, who, at the age of sixty-seven, when the reader will first make his acquaintance, had as yet done no good in the world whatever. Indeed he had done terrible evil; for his son Charles was now dead,—had perished by his own hand,—and the state of things which had brought about this woful event had been chiefly due to the father's neglect.

Belton Castle is a pretty country seat, standing in a small but beautifully wooded park, close under the Quantock hills in Somersetshire; and the little town of Belton clusters round the park gates. Few Englishmen know the scenery of England well, and the prettinesses of Somersetshire are among those which are the least known. But the Quantock hills are very lovely, with their rich valleys lying close among them, and their outlying moorlands running off towards Dulverton and the borders of Devonshire,—moorlands which are

not flat, like Salisbury Plain, but are broken into ravines and deep watercourses and rugged dells hither and thither; where old oaks are standing, in which life seems to have dwindled down to the last spark; but the last spark is still there, and the old oaks give forth their scanty leaves from year to year.

In among the hills, somewhat off the high road from Minehead to Taunton, and about five miles from the sea, stands the little town, or village, of Belton, and the modern house of Mr. Amedroz, which is called Belton Castle. The village,—for it is in truth no more, though it still maintains a charter for a market, and there still exists on Tuesdays some pretence of an open sale of grain and butcher's meat in the square before the church-gate,—contains about two thousand persons. That and the whole parish of Belton did once,—and that not long ago,—belong to the Amedroz family. They had inherited it from the Beltons of old, an Amedroz having married the heiress of the family. And as the parish is large, stretching away to Exmoor on one side,

and almost to the sea on the other, containing the hamlet of Redicote, lying on the Taunton high road,—Redicote, where the post-office is placed, a town almost in itself, and one which is now much more prosperous than Belton,—as the property when it came to the first Amedroz had limits such as these, the family had been considerable in the county. But these limits had been straitened in the days of the grandfather and the father of Bernard Amedroz; and he, when he married a Miss Winterfield of Taunton, was thought to have done very well, in that mortgages were paid off the property with his wife's money to such an extent as to leave him in clear possession of an estate that gave him two thousand a year. As Mr. Amedroz had no grand neighbours near him, as the place is remote and the living therefore cheap, and as with this income there was no question of annual visits to London, Mr. and Mrs. Amedroz might have done very well with such of the good things of the world as had fallen to their lot. And had the wife lived such would probably have been the case;

for the Winterfields were known to be prudent people. But Mrs. Amedroz had died young, and things with Bernard Amedroz had gone badly.

And yet the evil had not been so much with him as with that terrible boy of his. The father had been nearly forty when he married. He had then never done any good; but as neither had he done much harm, the friends of the family had argued well of his future career. After him, unless he should leave a son behind him, there would be no Amedroz left among the Quantock hills; and by some arrangement in respect to that Winterfield money which came to him on his marriage,—the Winterfields having a long-dated connection with the Beltons of old,—the Amedroz property was, at Bernard's marriage, entailed back upon a distant Belton cousin, one Will Belton, whom no one had seen for many years, but who was by blood nearer to the squire, in default of children of his own, than any other of his relatives. And now Will Belton was the heir to Belton Castle; for Charles Amedroz, at the age of

twenty-seven, had found the miseries of the world to be too many for him, and had put an end to them and to himself.

Charles had been a clever fellow,—a very clever fellow in the eyes of his father. Bernard Amedroz knew that he himself was not a clever fellow, and admired his son accordingly; and when Charles had been expelled from Harrow for some boyish freak,—in his vengeance against a neighbouring farmer, who had reported to the school authorities the doings of a few beagles upon his land, Charles had cut off the heads of all the trees in a young fir plantation,—his father was proud of the exploit. When he was rusticated a second time from Trinity, and when the father received an intimation that his son's name had better be taken from the College books, the squire was not so well pleased; but even then he found some delight in the stories which reached him of his son's vagaries; and when the young man commenced Bohemian life in London, his father did nothing to restrain him. Then there came the old story—debts, endless debts; and

lies, endless lies. During the two years before his death, his father paid for him, or undertook to pay, nearly ten thousand pounds, sacrificing the life assurances which were to have made provision for his daughter; sacrificing, to a great extent, his own life income,—sacrificing everything, so that the property might not be utterly ruined at his death. That Charles Amedroz should be a brighter, greater man than any other Amedroz, had still been the father's pride. At the last visit which Charles had paid to Belton his father had called upon him to pledge himself solemnly that his sister should not be made to suffer by what had been done for him. Within a month of that time he had blown his brains out in his London lodgings, thus making over the entire property to Will Belton at his father's death. At that last pretended settlement with his father and his father's lawyer, he had kept back the mention of debts as heavy nearly as those to which he had owned; and there were debts of honour, too, of which he had not spoken, trusting to the next event at Newmarket to set him right.

The next event at Newmarket had set him more wrong than ever, and so there had come an end to everything with Charles Amedroz.

This had happened in the spring, and the afflicted father,—afflicted with the double sorrow of his son's terrible death and his daughter's ruin,—had declared that he would turn his face to the wall and die. But the old squire's health, though far from strong, was stronger than he had deemed it, and his feelings, sharp enough, were less sharp than he had thought them; and when a month had passed by, he had discovered that it would be better that he should live, in order that his daughter might still have bread to eat and a house of her own over her head. Though he was now an impoverished man, there was still left to him the means of keeping up the old home; and he told himself that it must, if possible, be so kept that a few pounds annually might be put by for Clara. The old carriage-horses were sold, and the park was let to a farmer, up to the hall door of the castle. So much the squire could do; but as to the putting by of the few

pounds, any dependence on such exertion as that on his part would, we may say, be very precarious.

Belton Castle was not in truth a castle. Immediately before the front door, so near to the house as merely to allow of a broad road running between it and the entrance porch, there stood an old tower, which gave its name to the residence,—an old square tower, up which the Amedroz boys for three generations had been able to climb by means of the ivy and broken stones in one of the inner corners,—and this tower was a remnant of a real castle that had once protected the village of Belton. The house itself was an ugly residence, three stories high, built in the time of George II., with low rooms and long passages, and an immense number of doors. It was a large unattractive house,—unattractive, that is, as regarded its own attributes,—but made interesting by the beauty of the small park in which it stood. Belton Park did not, perhaps, contain much above a hundred acres, but the land was so broken into knolls and valleys, in so many places was the rock seen

to be cropping up through the verdure, there were in it so many stunted old oaks, so many points of vantage for the lover of scenery, that no one would believe it to be other than a considerable domain. The farmer who took it, and who would not under any circumstances undertake to pay more than seventeen shillings an acre for it, could not be made to think that it was in any way considerable. But Belton Park, since first it was made a park, had never before been regarded after this fashion. Farmer Stovey, of the Grange, was the first man of that class who had ever assumed the right to pasture his sheep in Belton chase,—as the people around were still accustomed to call the woodlands of the estate.

It was full summer at Belton, and four months had now passed since the dreadful tidings had reached the castle. It was full summer, and the people of the village were again going about their ordinary business; and the shop-girls, with their lovers from Redicote, were again to be seen walking among the oaks in the park on a Sunday evening; and the

world in that district of Somersetshire was getting itself back into its grooves. The fate of the young heir had disturbed the grooves greatly, and had taught many in those parts to feel that the world was coming to an end. They had not loved young Amedroz, for he had been haughty when among them, and there had been wrongs committed by the dissolute young squire, and grief had come from his misdoings upon more than one household; but to think that he should have destroyed himself with his own hand! And then, to think that Miss Clara would become a beggar when the old squire should die! All the neighbours around understood the whole history of the entail, and knew that the property was to go to Will Belton. Now Will Belton was not a gentleman! So, at least, said the Belton folk, who had heard that the heir had been brought up as a farmer somewhere in Norfolk. Will Belton had once been at the Castle as a boy, now some fifteen years ago, and then there had sprung up a great quarrel between him and his distant cousin Charles;—and Will, who was rough

and large of stature, had thrashed the smaller boy severely; and the thing had grown to have dimensions larger than those which generally attend the quarrels of boys; and Will had said something which had shown how well he understood his position in reference to the estate;—and Charles had hated him. So Will had gone, and had been no more seen among the oaks whose name he bore. And the people, in spite of his name, regarded him as an interloper. To them, with their short memories and scanty knowledge of the past, Amedroz was more honourable than Belton, and they looked upon the coming man as an intruder. Why should not Miss Clara have the property? Miss Clara had never done harm to any one!

Things got back into their old grooves, and at the end of the third month the squire was once more seen in the old family pew at church. He was a large man, who had been very handsome, and who now, in his yellow leaf, was not without a certain beauty of manliness. He wore his hair and his beard long; before his son's death they were grey, but now they were very

white. And though he stooped, there was still a dignity in his slow step,—a dignity that came to him from nature rather than from any effort. He was a man who, in fact, did little or nothing in the world,—whose life had been very useless; but he had been gifted with such a presence that he looked as though he were one of God's nobler creatures. Though always dignified he was ever affable, and the poor liked him better than they might have done had he passed his time in searching out their wants and supplying them. They were proud of their squire, though he had done nothing for them. It was something to them to have a man who could so carry himself sitting in the family pew in their parish church. They knew that he was poor, but they all declared that he was never mean. He was a real gentleman,—was this last Amedroz of the family; therefore they curtsied low, and bowed on his reappearance among them, and made all those signs of reverential awe which are common to the poor when they feel reverence for the presence of a superior.

Clara was there with him, but she had shown herself in the pew for four or five weeks before this. She had not been at home when the fearful news had reached Belton, being at that time with a certain lady who lived on the further side of the county, at Perivale,—a certain Mrs. Winterfield, born a Folliot, a widow, who stood to Miss Amedroz in the place of an aunt. Mrs. Winterfield was, in truth, the sister of a gentleman who had married Clara's aunt,—there having been marriages and intermarriages between the Winterfields and the Folliots, and the Belton-Amedroz families. With this lady in Perivale, which I maintain to be the dullest little town in England, Miss Amedroz was staying when the news reached her father, and when it was brought direct from London to herself. Instantly she had hurried home, making the journey with all imaginable speed though her heart was all but broken within her bosom. She had found her father stricken to the ground, and it was the more necessary, therefore, that she should exert herself. It would not do that she also should yield to that

longing for death which terrible calamities often produce for a season.

Clara Amedroz, when she first heard the news of her brother's fate, had felt that she was for ever crushed to the ground. She had known too well what had been the nature of her brother's life, but she had not expected or feared any such termination to his career as this which had now come upon him—to the terrible affliction of all belonging to him. She felt at first, as did also her father, that she and he were annihilated as regards this world, not only by an enduring grief, but also by a disgrace which would never allow her again to hold up her head. And for many a long year much of this feeling clung to her;—clung to her much more strongly than to her father. But strength was hers to perceive, even before she had reached her home, that it was her duty to repress both the feeling of shame and the sorrow, as far as they were capable of repression. Her brother had been weak, and in his weakness had sought a coward's escape from the ills of the world around him. She

must not also be a coward! Bad as life might be to her henceforth, she must endure it with such fortitude as she could muster. So resolving she returned to her father, and was able to listen to his railings with a fortitude that was essentially serviceable both to him and to herself.

"Both of you! Both of you!" the unhappy father had said in his woe. "The wretched boy has destroyed you as much as himself!" "No, sir," she had answered, with a forbearance in her misery, which, terrible as was the effort, she forced herself to accomplish for his sake. "It is not so. No thought of that need add to your grief. My poor brother has not hurt me;—not in the way you mean." "He has ruined us all," said the father; "root and branch, man and woman, old and young, house and land. He has brought the family to an end;—ah me, to such an end!" After that the name of him who had taken himself from among them was not mentioned between the father and daughter, and Clara settled herself to the duties of her new life, striving

to live as though there was no great sorrow around her—as though no cloud-storm had burst over her head.

The family lawyer, who lived at Taunton, had communicated the fact of Charles's death to Mr. Belton, and Belton had acknowledged the letter with the ordinary expressions of regret. The lawyer had alluded to the entail, saying that it was improbable that Mr. Amedroz would have another son. To this Belton had replied that for his cousin Clara's sake he hoped that the squire's life might be long spared. The lawyer smiled as he read the wish, thinking to himself that luckily no wish on the part of Will Belton could influence his old client either for good or evil. What man, let alone what lawyer, will ever believe in the sincerity of such a wish as that expressed by the heir to a property? And yet where is the man who will not declare to himself that such, under such circumstances, would be his own wish?

Clara Amedroz at this time was not a very young lady. She had already passed her

twenty-fifth birthday, and in manners, appearance, and habits was, at any rate, as old as her age. She made no pretence to youth, speaking of herself always as one whom circumstances required to take upon herself age in advance of her years. She did not dress young, or live much with young people, or correspond with other girls by means of crossed letters; nor expect that, for her, young pleasures should be provided. Life had always been serious with her; but now, we may say, since the terrible tragedy in the family, it must be solemn as well as serious. The memory of her brother must always be upon her; and the memory also of the fact that her father was now an impoverished man, on whose behalf it was her duty to care that every shilling spent in the house did its full twelve pennies' worth of work. There was a mixture in this of deep tragedy and of little care, which seemed to destroy for her the poetry as well as the pleasure of life. The poetry and tragedy might have gone hand in hand together; and so might the cares and pleasures of life have

done, had there been no black sorrow of which she must be ever mindful. But it was her lot to have to scrutinize the butcher's bill as she was thinking of her brother's fate; and to work daily among small household things while the spectre of her brother's corpse was ever before her eyes.

A word must be said to explain how it had come to pass that the life led by Miss Amedroz had been more than commonly serious before that tragedy had befallen the family. The name of the lady who stood to Clara in the place of an aunt has been already mentioned. When a girl has a mother, her aunt may be little or nothing to her. But when the mother is gone, if there be an aunt unimpeded with other family duties, then the family duties of that aunt begin—and are assumed sometimes with great vigour. Such had been the case with Mrs. Winterfield. No woman ever lived, perhaps, with more conscientious ideas of her duty as a woman than Mrs. Winterfield of Prospect Place, Perivale. And this, as I say it, is intended to convey no scoff against

that excellent lady. She was an excellent lady —unselfish, given to self-restraint, generous, pious, looking to find in her religion a safe path through life—a path as safe as the facts of Adam's fall would allow her feet to find. She was a woman fearing much for others, but fearing also much for herself, striving to maintain her house in godliness, hating sin, and struggling with the weakness of her humanity so that she might not allow herself to hate the sinners. But her hatred for the sin she found herself bound at all times to pronounce—to show it by some act at all seasons. To fight the devil was her work—was the appointed work of every living soul, if only living souls could be made to acknowledge the necessity of the task. Now an aunt of that kind, when she assumes her duties towards a motherless niece, is apt to make life serious.

But, it will be said, Clara Amedroz could have rebelled; and Clara's father was hardly made of such stuff that obedience to the aunt would be enforced on her by parental authority. Doubtless Clara could have rebelled against

her aunt. Indeed, I do not know that she had hitherto been very obedient. But there were family facts about these Winterfield connections which would have made it difficult for her to ignore her so-called aunt, even had she wished to do so. Mrs. Winterfield had twelve hundred a year at her own disposal, and she was the only person related to the Amedroz family from whom Mr. Amedroz had a right to have expectations on his daughter's behalf. Clara had, in a measure, been claimed by the lady, and the father had made good the lady's claim, and Clara had acknowledged that a portion of her life was due to the demands of Perivale. These demands had undoubtedly made her life serious.

Life at Perivale was a very serious thing. As regards amusement, ordinarily so called, the need of any such institution was not acknowledged at Prospect House. Food, drink, and raiment were acknowledged to be necessary to humanity, and, in accordance with the rules of that house, they were supplied in plenty, and good of their kind. Such ladies

as Mrs. Winterfield generally keep good tables, thinking no doubt that the eatables should do honour to the grace that is said for them. And Mrs. Winterfield herself always wore a thick black silk dress,—not rusty or dowdy with age,—but with some gloss of the silk on it; giving away, with secret, underhand, undiscovered charity, her old dresses to another lady of her own sort, on whom fortune had not bestowed twelve hundred a year. And Mrs. Winterfield kept a low, four-wheeled, one-horsed little phaeton, in which she made her pilgrimages among the poor of Perivale, driven by the most solemn of stable-boys, dressed up in a white great coat, the most priggish of hats, and white cotton gloves. At the rate of five miles an hour was she driven about, and this driving was to her the amusement of life. But such an occupation to Clara Amedroz assisted to make life serious.

In person Mrs. Winterfield was tall and thin, wearing on her brow thin braids of false hair. She had suffered much from acute ill health, and her jaws were sunken, and her eyes

were hollow, and there was a look of woe about her which seemed ever to be telling of her own sorrows in this world and of the sorrows of others in the world to come. Ill-nature was written on her face, but in this her face was a false face. She had the manners of a cross, peevish woman; but her manners also were false, and gave no proper idea of her character. But still, such as she was, she made life very serious to those who were called upon to dwell with her.

I need, I hope, hardly say that a young lady such as Miss Amedroz, even though she had reached the age of twenty-five,—for at the time to which I am now alluding she had nearly done so,—and was not young of her age, had formed for herself no plan of life in which her aunt's money figured as a motive power. She had gone to Perivale when she was very young, because she had been told to do so, and had continued to go, partly from obedience, partly from habit, and partly from affection. An aunt's dominion, when once well established in early years, cannot easily

be thrown altogether aside,—even though a young lady have a will of her own. Now Clara Amedroz had a strong will of her own, and did not at all,—at any rate in these latter days,—belong to that school of divinity in which her aunt shone almost as a professor. And this circumstance, also, added to the seriousness of her life. But in regard to her aunt's money she had entertained no established hopes; and when her aunt opened her mind to her on that subject, a few days before the arrival of the fatal news at Perivale, Clara, though she was somewhat surprised, was by no means disappointed. Now there was a certain Captain Aylmer in the question, of whom in this opening chapter it will be necessary to say a few words.

Captain Frederic Folliott Aylmer was, in truth, the nephew of Mrs. Winterfield, whereas Clara Amedroz was not, in truth, her niece. And Captain Aylmer was also Member of Parliament for the little borough of Perivale, returned altogether on the Low Church interest,—for a devotion to which, and for that

alone, Perivale was noted among boroughs. These facts together added not a little to Mrs. Winterfield's influence and professorial power in the place, and gave a dignity to the one-horse chaise which it might not otherwise have possessed. But Captain Aylmer was only the second son of his father, Sir Anthony Aylmer, who had married a Miss Folliott, sister of our Mrs. Winterfield. On Frederic Aylmer his mother's estate was settled. That and Mrs. Winterfield's property lay in the neighbourhood of Perivale; and now, on the occasion to which I am alluding, Mrs. Winterfield thought it necessary to tell Clara that the property must all go together. She had thought about it, and had doubted about it, and had prayed about it, and now she found that such a disposition of it was her duty.

"I am quite sure you're right, aunt," Clara had said. She knew very well what had come of that provision which her father had attempted to make for her, and knew also how great were her father's expectations in regard to Mrs. Winterfield's money.

"I hope I am; but I have thought it right to tell you. I shall feel myself bound to tell Frederic. I have had many doubts, but I think I am right."

"I am sure you are, aunt. What would he think of me if, at some future time, he should have to find that I had been in his way?"

"The future time will not be long now, my dear."

"I hope it may; but long or short, it is better so."

"I think it is, my dear; I think it is. I think it is my duty."

It must be understood that Captain Aylmer was member for Perivale on the Low Church interest, and that, therefore, when at Perivale he was decidedly a Low Churchman. I am not aware that the peculiarity stuck to him very closely at Aylmer Castle, in Yorkshire, or among his friends in London; but there was no hypocrisy in this, as the world goes. Women in such matters are absolutely false if they be not sincere; but men, with political views, and with much of their future prospects

in jeopardy also, are allowed to dress themselves differently for different scenes. Whatever be the peculiar interest on which a man goes into Parliament, of course he has to live up to that in his own borough. Whether malt, the franchise, or teetotalism be his rallying point, of course he is full of it when among his constituents. But it is not desirable that he should be full of it also at his club. Had Captain Aylmer become Prime Minister, he would no doubt, have made Low Church bishops. It was the side to which he had taken himself in that matter,—not without good reasons. And he could say a sharp word or two in season about vestments; he was strong against candles, and fought for his side fairly well. No one had good right to complain of Captain Aylmer as being insincere; but had his aunt known the whole history of her nephew's life, I doubt whether she would have made him her heir,—thinking that in doing so she was doing the best for the good cause.

The whole history of her niece's life she did

know, and she knew that Clara was not with her, heart and soul. Had Clara left the old woman in doubt on this subject, she would have been a hypocrite. Captain Aylmer did not often spend a Sunday at Perivale, but when he did, he went to church three times, and submitted himself to the yoke. He was thinking of the borough votes quite as much as of his aunt's money, and was carrying on his business after the fashion of men. But Clara found herself compelled to maintain some sort of a fight, though she also went to church three times on Sunday. And there was another reason why Mrs. Winterfield thought it right to mention Captain Aylmer's name to her niece on this occasion.

"I had hoped," she said, "that it might make no difference in what way my money was left."

Clara well understood what this meant, as will, probably, the reader also. "I can't say but what it will make a difference," she answered, smiling; "but I shall always think that you have done right. Why should I stand in Captain Aylmer's way?"

"I had hoped your ways might have been the same," said the old lady, fretfully.

"But they cannot be the same."

"No; you do not see things as he sees them. Things that are serious to him are, I fear, only light to you. Dear Clara, would I could see you more in earnest as to the only matter that is worth our earnestness." Miss Amedroz said nothing as to the Captain's earnestness, though, perhaps, her ideas as to his ideas about religion were more correct than those held by Mrs. Winterfield. But it would not have suited her to raise any argument on that subject. "I pray for you, Clara," continued the old lady; "and will do so as long as the power of prayer is left to me. I hope,—I hope you do not cease to pray for yourself?"

"I endeavour, aunt."

"It is an endeavour which, if really made, never fails."

Clara said nothing more, and her aunt also remained silent. Soon afterwards, the four-wheeled carriage, with the demure stable-boy, came to the door, and Clara was driven up and

down through the streets of Perivale in a manner which was an injury to her. She knew that she was suffering an injustice, but it was one of which she could not make complaint. She submitted to her aunt, enduring the penances that were required of her; and, therefore, her aunt had opportunity enough to see her shortcomings. Mrs. Winterfield did see them, and judged her accordingly. Captain Aylmer, being a man and a Member of Parliament, was called upon to bear no such penances, and, therefore, his shortcomings were not suspected.

But, after all, what title had she ever possessed to entertain expectations from Mrs. Winterfield? When she thought of it all in her room that night, she told herself that it was strange that her aunt should have spoken to her in such a way on such a subject. But, then, so much had been said to her on the matter by her father, so much, no doubt, had reached her aunt's ears also, the hope that her position with reference to the rich widow at Perivale might be beneficial to her had been

so often discussed at Belton as a make-weight against the extravagance of the heir, there had already been so much of this mistake, that she taught herself to perceive that the communication was needed. "In her honesty she has not chosen to leave me with false hopes," said Clara to herself. And at that moment she loved her aunt for her honesty

Then, on the day but one following this conversation as to the destiny of her aunt's property, came the terrible tidings of her brother's death. Captain Aylmer, who had been in London at the time, hurried down to Perivale, and had been the first to tell Miss Amedroz what had happened. The words spoken between them then had not been many, but Clara knew that Captain Aylmer had been kind to her; and when he had offered to accompany her to Belton, she had thanked with a degree of gratitude which had almost seemed to imply more of regard between them than Clara would have acknowledged to exist. But in moments such as those, soft words may be spoken and hands may be pressed without any

of that meaning which soft words and the grasping of hands generally carry with them. As far as Taunton Captain Aylmer did go with Miss Amedroz, and there they parted, he on his journey up to town, and she for her father's desolate house at Belton.

CHAPTER II.

THE HEIR PROPOSES TO VISIT HIS COUSINS.

It was full summer at Belton, and the sweet scent of the new hay filled the porch of the old house with fragrance, as Clara sat there alone with her work. Immediately before the house door, between that and the old tower, there stood one of Farmer Stovey's hay-carts, now empty, with an old horse between the shafts looking as though he were asleep in the sun. Immediately beyond the tower the men were loading another cart, and the women and children were chattering as they raked the scattered remnants up to the rows. Under the shadow of the old tower, but in sight of

Clara as she sat in the porch, there lay the small beer-barrels of the hay-makers, and three or four rakes were standing erect against the old grey wall. It was now eleven o'clock, and Clara was waiting for her father, who was not yet out of his room. She had taken his breakfast to him in bed, as was her custom; for he had fallen into idle ways, and the luxury of his bed was, of all his remaining luxuries, the one that he liked the best. After a while he came down to her, having an open letter in his hand. Clara saw that he intended either to show it to her or to speak of it, and asked him therefore, with some tone of interest in her voice, from whom it had come. But Mr. Amedroz was fretful at the moment, and instead of answering her began to complain of his tenant's ill-usage of him.

"What has he got his cart there for? I haven't let him the road up to the hall door. I suppose he will bring his things into the parlour next."

"I rather like it, papa."

"Do you? I can only say that you're lucky

in your tastes. I don't like it, I can tell you."

"Mr. Stovey is out there. Shall I ask him to have the things moved further off?"

"No, my dear,—no. I must bear it, as I do all the rest of it. What does it matter? There'll be an end of it soon. He pays his rent, and I suppose he is right to do as he pleases. But I can't say that I like it."

"Am I to see the letter, papa?" she asked, wishing to turn his mind from the subject of the hay-cart.

"Well, yes. I brought it for you to see; though perhaps I should be doing better if I burned it, and said nothing more about it. It is a most impudent production; and heartless, —very heartless."

Clara was accustomed to such complaints as these from her father. Everything that everybody did around him he would call heartless. The man pitied himself so much in his own misery, that he expected to live in an atmosphere of pity from others; and though the pity doubtless was there, he misdoubted it. He

thought that Farmer Stovey was cruel in that he had left the hay-cart near the house, to wound his eyes by reminding him that he was no longer master of the ground before his own hall door. He thought that the women and children were cruel to chatter so near his ears. He almost accused his daughter of cruelty, because she had told him that she liked the contiguity of the hay-making. Under such circumstances as those which enveloped him and her, was it not heartless in her to like anything? It seemed to him that the whole world of Belton should be drowned in woe because of his misery.

"Where is it from, papa?" she asked.

"There, you may read it. Perhaps it is better that you should know that it has been written." Then she read the letter, which was as follows:—

"Plaistow Hall,—July, 186—."

Though she had never before seen the handwriting, she knew at once from whence came the letter, for she had often heard of Plaistow Hall. It was the name of the farm at which her distant cousin, Will Belton, lived, and her

father had more than once been at the trouble of explaining to her, that though the place was called a hall, the house was no more than a farmhouse. He had never seen Plaistow Hall, and had never been in Norfolk; but so much he could take upon himself to say, "They call all the farms halls down there." It was not wonderful that he should dislike his heir; and, perhaps, not unnatural that he should show his dislike after this fashion. Clara, when she read the address, looked up into her father's face. "You know who it is now," he said. And then she read the letter.

Plaistow Hall,—July, 186—.

"My dear Sir,

"I have not written to you before since your bereavement, thinking it better to wait awhile; but I hope you have not taken me to be unkind in this, or have supposed me to be unmindful of your sorrow. Now I take up my pen, hoping that I may make you understand how greatly I was distressed by what has occurred. I believe I am now the nearest

male relative that you have, and as such I am very anxious to be of service to you if it may be possible. Considering the closeness of our connection, and my position in reference to the property, it seems bad that we should never meet. I can assure you that you would find me very friendly if we could manage to come together.

"I should think nothing of running across to Belton, if you would receive me at your house. I could come very well before harvest, if that would suit you, and would stay with you for a week. Pray give my kindest regards to my cousin Clara, whom I can only just remember as a very little girl. She was with her aunt at Perivale when I was at Belton as a boy. She shall find a friend in me if she wants a friend.

"Your affectionate cousin,

"W. Belton."

Clara read the letter very slowly, so that she might make herself sure of its tone and bearing before she was called upon by her

father to express her feeling respecting it. She knew that she would be expected to abuse it violently, and to accuse the writer of vulgarity, insolence, and cruelty; but she had already learned that she must not allow herself to accede to all her father's fantasies. For his sake, and for his protection, it was necessary that she should differ from him, and even contradict him. Were she not to do so, he would fall into a state of wailing and complaining that would exaggerate itself almost to idiotcy. And it was imperative that she herself should exercise her own opinion on many points, almost without reference to him. She alone knew how utterly destitute she would be when he should die. He, in the first days of his agony, had sobbed forth his remorse as to her ruin; but, even when doing so, he had comforted himself with the remembrance of Mrs. Winterfield's money, and Mrs. Winterfield's affection for his daughter. And the aunt, when she had declared her purpose to Clara, had told herself that the provision made for Clara by her father was sufficient. To

neither of them had Clara told her own position. She could not inform her aunt that her father had given up to the poor reprobate who had destroyed himself all that had been intended for her. Had she done so she would have been asking her aunt for charity. Nor would she bring herself to add to her father's misery, by destroying the hopes which still supported him. She never spoke of her own position in regard to money, but she knew that it had become her duty to live a wary, watchful life, taking much upon herself in their impoverished household, and holding her own opinion against her father's when her doing so became expedient. So she finished the letter in silence, and did not speak at the moment when the movement of her eyes declared that she had completed the task.

"Well," said he.

"I do not think my cousin means badly."

"You don't! I do, then. I think he means very badly. What business has he to write to me, talking of his position?"

"I can't see anything amiss in his doing so,

papa. I think he wishes to be friendly. The property will be his some day, and I don't see why that should not be mentioned, when there is occasion."

"Upon my word, Clara, you surprise me. But women never understand delicacy in regard to money. They have so little to do with it, and think so little about it, that they have no occasion for such delicacy."

Clara could not help the thought that to her mind the subject was present with sufficient frequency to make delicacy very desirable, if only it were practicable. But of this she said nothing. "And what answer will you send to him, papa?" she asked.

"None at all. Why should I trouble myself to write to him?"

"I will take the trouble off your hands."

"And what will you say to him?"

"I will ask him to come here, as he proposes."

"Clara!"

"Why not, papa? He is the heir to the property, and why should he not be permitted

to see it? There are many things in which his co-operation with you might be a comfort to you. I can't tell you whether the tenants and people are treating you well, but he can do so; and, moreover, I think he means to be kind. I do not see why we should quarrel with our cousin because he is the heir to your property. It is not through any doing of his own that he is so."

This reasoning had no effect upon Mr. Amedroz, but his daughter's resolution carried the point against him in spite of his want of reason. No letter was written that day, or on the next; but on the day following a formal note was sent off by Clara, in which Mr. Belton was told that Mr. Amedroz would be happy to receive him at Belton Castle. The letter was written by the daughter, but the father was responsible for the formality. He sat over her while she wrote it, and nearly drove her distracted by discussing every word and phrase. At last, Clara was so annoyed with her own production, that she was almost tempted to write another letter

unknown to her father; but the formal note went.

"My dear Sir,

"I am desired by my father to say that he will be happy to receive you at Belton Castle, at the time fixed by yourself.

"Yours truly,

"Clara Amedroz."

There was no more than that, but that had the desired effect; and by return of post there came a rejoinder, saying that Will Belton would be at the Castle on the fifteenth of August. "They can do without me for about ten days," he said in his postscript, writing in a familiar tone, which did not seem to have been at all checked by the coldness of his cousin's note,—"as our harvest will be late; but I must be back for a week's work before the partridges."

"Heartless! quite heartless!" Mr. Amedroz said as he read this. "Partridges! to talk of partridges at such a time as this!"

Clara, however, would not acknowledge that she agreed with her father; but she could not altogether restrain a feeling on her own part that her cousin's good humour towards her and Mr. Amedroz should have been repressed by the tone of her letter to him. The man was to come, however, and she would not judge of him until he was there.

In one house in the neighbourhood, and in only one, had Miss Amedroz a friend with whom she was intimate; and as regarded even this single friend, the intimacy was the effect rather of circumstances than of real affection. She liked Mrs. Askerton, and saw her almost daily; but she could hardly tell herself that she loved her neighbour.

In the little town of Belton, close to the church, there stood a pretty, small house, called Belton Cottage. It was so near the church that strangers always supposed it to be the parsonage; but the rectory stood away out in the country, half a mile from the town, on the road to Redicote, and was a large house, three stories high, with grounds of its own,

and very ugly. Here lived the old bachelor rector, seventy years of age, given much to long absences when he could achieve them, and never on good terms with his bishop. His two curates lived at Redicote, where there was a second church. Belton Cottage, which was occupied by Colonel Askerton and Mrs. Askerton, was on the Amedroz property, and had been hired some two years since by the Colonel, who was then a stranger in the country and altogether unknown to the Belton people. But he had come there for shooting, and therefore his coming had been understood. Even as long ago as two years since, there had been neither use nor propriety in keeping the shooting for the squire's son, and it had been let with the cottage to Colonel Askerton. So Colonel Askerton had come there with his wife, and no one in the neighbourhood had known anything about them. Mr. Amedroz, with his daughter, had called upon them, and gradually there had grown up an intimacy between Clara and Mrs. Askerton. There was an opening from the garden of Belton Cottage

into the park, so that familiar intercourse was easy, and Mrs. Askerton was a woman who knew well how to make herself pleasant to such another woman as Miss Amedroz.

The reader may as well know at once that rumours prejudical to the Askertons reached Belton before they had been established there for six months. At Taunton, which was twenty miles distant, these rumours were very rife, and there were people there who knew with accuracy,—though probably without a grain of truth in their accuracy,—every detail in the history of Mrs. Askerton's life. And something, too, reached Clara's ears—something from old Mr. Wright, the rector, who loved scandal, and was very ill-natured. "A very nice woman," the rector had said; "but she does not seem to have any belongings in particular." "She has got a husband," Clara had replied with some little indignation, for she had never loved Mr. Wright. "Yes; I suppose she has got a husband." Then Clara had, in her own judgment, accused the rector of lying, evil-speaking, and slandering, and

had increased the measure of her cordiality to Mrs. Askerton. But something more she had heard on the same subject at Perivale. "Before you throw yourself into close intimacy with the lady, I think you should know something about her," Mrs. Winterfield had said to her. "I do know something about her; I know that she has the manners and education of a lady, and that she is living affectionately with her husband, who is devoted to her. What more ought I to know?" "If you really do know all that, you know a great deal," Mrs. Winterfield had replied.

"Do you know anything against her, aunt?" Clara asked, after a pause.

There was another pause before Mrs. Winterfield answered. "No my dear; I cannot say that I do. But I think that young ladies, before they make intimate friendships, should be very sure of their friends."

"You have already acknowledged that I know a great deal about her," Clara replied. And then the conversation was at an end. Clara had not been quite ingenuous, as she

acknowledged to herself. She was aware that her aunt would not permit herself to repeat rumours as to the truth of which she had no absolute knowledge. She understood that the weakness of her aunt's caution was due to the old lady's sense of charity and dislike of slander. But Clara had buckled on her armour for Mrs. Askerton, and was glad, therefore, to achieve her little victory. When we buckle on our armour in any cause, we are apt to go on buckling it, let the cause become as weak as it may; and Clara continued her intimacy with Mrs. Askerton, although there was something in the lady's modes of speech, and something also in her modes of thinking, which did not quite satisfy the aspirations of Miss Amedroz as to a friend.

Colonel Askerton himself was a pleasant, quiet man, who seemed to be contented with the life which he was leading. For six weeks in April and May he would go up to town, leaving Mrs. Askerton at the cottage,—as to which, probably jovial, absence in the metropolis there seemed to be no spirit of grudging on

the part of the wife. On the first of September a friend would come to the cottage and remain there for six weeks' shooting; and during the winter the Colonel and his wife always went to Paris for a fortnight. Such had been their life for the last two years; and thus,—so said Mrs. Askerton to Clara,—did they intend to live as long as they could keep the cottage at Belton. Society at Belton they had none, and,—as they said,—desired none. Between them and Mr. Wright there was only a speaking acquaintance. The married curate at Redicote would not let his wife call on Mrs. Askerton, and the unmarried curate was a hard-worked, clerical hack,—a parochial minister at all times and seasons, who went to no houses except the houses of the poor, and who would hold communion with no man, and certainly with no woman, who would not put up with clerical admonitions for Sunday backslidings. Mr. Amedroz himself neither received guests nor went as a guest to other men's houses. He would occasionally stand for a while at the gate of the Colonel's garden, and repeat the list of

his own woes as long as his neighbour would stand there to hear it. But there was no society at Belton, and Clara, as far as she herself was aware, was the only person with whom Mrs. Askerton held any social intercourse, except what she might have during her short annual holiday in Paris.

"Of course, you are right," she said, when Clara told her of the proposed coming of Mr. Belton. "If he turn out to be a good fellow, you will have gained a great deal. And should he be a bad fellow, you will have lost nothing. In either case you will know him, and considering how he stands towards you, that itself is desirable."

"But if he should annoy papa?"

"In your papa's condition, my dear, the coming of any one will annoy him. At least, he will say so; though I do not in the least doubt that he will like the excitement better even than you will."

"I can't say there will be much excitement to me."

"No excitement in a young man's coming

into the house! Without shocking your propriety, allow me to say that that is impossible. Of course, he is coming to see whether he can't make matters all right by marrying you."

"That's nonsense, Mrs. Askerton."

"Very well. Let it be nonsense. But why shouldn't he? It's just what he ought to do. He hasn't got a wife; and, as far as I know, you haven't got a lover."

"I certainly have not got a lover."

"Our religious nephew at Perivale does not seem to be of any use."

"I wish, Mrs. Askerton, you would not speak of Captain Aylmer in that way. I don't know any man whom I like so much, or at any rate better, than Captain Aylmer; but I hate the idea that no girl can become acquainted with an unmarried man without having her name mentioned with his, and having to hear ill-natured remarks of that kind."

"I hope you will learn to like this other man much better. Think how nice it will be to be mistress of the old place after all. And then to go back to the old family name! If I

were you I would make up my mind not to let him leave the place till I had brought him to my feet."

"If you go on like that I will not speak to you about him again."

"Or rather not to my feet,—for gentlemen have laid aside the humble way of making love for the last twenty years at least; but I don't know whether the women haven't gained quite as much by the change as the men."

"As I know nothing will stop you when you once get into a vein of that kind, I shall go," said Clara. "And till this man has come and gone I shall not mention his name again in your presence."

"So be it," said Mrs. Askerton; "but as I will promise to say nothing more about him, you need not go on his account." But Clara had got up, and did leave the cottage at once.

CHAPTER III.

WILL BELTON.

Mr. Belton came to the castle, and nothing further had been said at the cottage about his coming. Clara had seen Mrs. Askerton in the meantime frequently, but that lady had kept her promise—almost to Clara's disappointment. For she—though she had in truth disliked the proposition that her cousin could be coming with any special views with reference to herself had nevertheless sufficient curiosity about the stranger to wish to talk about him. Her father, indeed, mentioned Belton's name very frequently, saying something with reference to him every time he found himself in his

daughter's presence. A dozen times he said that the man was heartless to come to the house at such a time, and he spoke of his cousin always as though the man were guilty of a gross injustice in being heir to the property. But not the less on that account did he fidget himself about the room in which Belton was to sleep, about the food that Belton was to eat, and especially about the wine that Belton was to drink. What was he to do for wine? The stock of wine in the cellars at Belton Castle was, no doubt, very low. The squire himself drank a glass or two of port daily, and had some remnant of his old treasures by him, which might perhaps last him his time; and occasionally there came small supplies of sherry from the grocer at Taunton; but Mr. Amedroz pretended to think that Will Belton would want champagne and claret;—and he would continue to make these suggestions in spite of his own repeated complaints that the man was no better than an ordinary farmer. "I've no doubt he'll like beer," said Clara. "Beer!" said her

father, and then stopped himself, as though he were lost in doubt whether it would best suit him to scorn his cousin for having so low a taste as that suggested on his behalf, or to ridicule his daughter's idea that the household difficulty admitted of so convenient a solution.

The day of the arrival at last came, and Clara certainly was in a twitter, although she had steadfastly resolved that she would be in no twitter at all. She had told her aunt by letter of the proposed visit, and Mrs. Winterfield had expressed her approbation, saying that she hoped it would lead to good results. Of what good results could her aunt be thinking? The one probable good result would surely be this—that relations so nearly connected should know each other. Why should there be any fuss made about such a visit? But, nevertheless, Clara, though she made no outward fuss, knew that inwardly she was not as calm about the man's coming as she would have wished herself to be.

He arrived about five o'clock in a gig from Taunton. Five was the ordinary dinner hour

at Belton, but it had been postponed till six on this day, in the hope that the cousin might make his appearance at any rate by that hour. Mr. Amedroz had uttered various complaints as to the visitor's heartlessness in not having written to name the hour of his arrival, and was manifestly intending to make the most of the grievance should he not present himself before six;—but this indulgence was cut short by the sound of the gig wheels. Mr. Amedroz and his daughter were sitting in a small drawing-room, which looked out to the front of the house and he, seated in his accustomed chair, near the window, could see the arrival. For a moment or two he remained quiet in his chair, as though he would not allow so insignificant a thing as his cousin's coming to ruffle him;—but he could not maintain this dignified indifference, and before Belton was out of the gig he had shuffled out into the hall.

Clara followed her father almost unconsciously and soon found herself shaking hands with a big man, over six feet high, broad in the shoulders, large limbed, with bright quick

grey eyes, a large mouth, teeth almost too perfect and a well-formed nose, with thick short brown hair and small whiskers which came but half-way down his cheeks — a decidedly handsome man with a florid face, but still, perhaps, with something of the promised roughness of the farmer. But a more good-humoured looking countenance Clara felt at once that she had never beheld.

"And you are the little girl that I remember when I was a boy at Mr. Folliott's?" he said. His voice was clear, and rather loud, but it sounded very pleasantly in that sad old house.

"Yes; I am the little girl," said Clara, smiling.

"Dear, dear! and that's twenty years ago now," said he.

"But you oughtn't to remind me of that, Mr. Belton."

"Oughtn't I? Why not?"

"Because it shows how very old I am."

"Ah, yes;—to be sure. But there's nobody here that signifies. How well I remember

this room;—and the old tower out there. It isn't changed a bit!"

"Not to the outward eye, perhaps," said the squire.

"That's what I mean. So they're making hay still. Our hay has been all up these three weeks. I didn't know you ever meadowed the park." here he trod with dreadful severity upon the corns of Mr. Amedroz, but he did not perceive it. And when the squire muttered something about a tenant, and the inconvenience of keeping land in his own hands, Belton would have gone on with the subject had not Clara changed the conversation. The squire complained bitterly of this to Clara when they were alone saying that it was very heartless.

She had a little scheme of her own,—a plan arranged for the saying of a few words to her cousin on the earliest opportunity of their being alone together,—and she contrived that this should take place within half an hour after his arrival, as he went through the hall up to his room. "Mr. Belton," she said, "I'm sure

you will not take it amiss if I take a cousin's privilege at once and explain to you something of our way of living here. My dear father is not very strong."

"He is much altered since I saw him last."

"Oh, yes. Think of all that he has had to bear! Well, Mr. Belton, the fact is, that we are not so well off as we used to be, and are obliged to live in a very quiet way. You will not mind that?"

"Who? I?"

"I take it very kind of you, your coming all this way to see us——"

"I'd have come three times the distance."

"But you must put up with us as you find us, you know. The truth is we are very poor."

"Well, now;—that's just what I wanted to know. One couldn't write and ask such a question; but I was sure I should find out if I came."

"You've found it out already, you see."

"As for being poor, it's a thing I don't think very much about,—not for young people. But it

isn't comfortable when a man gets old. Now what I want to know is this; can't something be done?"

"The only thing to do is to be very kind to him. He has had to let the park to Mr. Stovey, and he dosen't like talking about it."

"But if it isn't talked about, how can it be mended?"

"It can't be mended?"

"We'll see about that. But I'll be kind to him; you see if I ain't. And I'll tell you what, I'll be kind to you too, if you'll let me. You have got no brother now."

"No," said Clara; "I have got no brother now." Belton was looking full into her face, and saw that her eyes had become clouded with tears.

"I will be your brother," said he. "You see if I don't. When I say a thing I mean it. I will be your brother." And he took her hand, caressing it, and showing her that he was not in the least afraid of her. He was blunt in his bearing, saying things which her father would have called indelicate and heartless, as though

they gave him no effort, and placing himself at once almost in a position of ascendency. This Clara had not intended. She had thought that her farmer cousin, in spite of the superiority of his prospects as heir to the property, would have acceded to her little hints with silent acquiescence; but instead of this he seemed prepared to take upon himself the chief part in the play that was to be acted between them. "Shall it be so?" he said still holding her hand.

"You are very kind."

"I will be more than kind; I will love you dearly if you will let me. You don't suppose that I have looked you up here for nothing. Blood is thicker than water, and you have nobody now so near to you as I am. I don't see why you should be so poor, as the debts have been paid."

"Papa has had to borrow money on his life interest in the place."

"That's the mischief! Never mind. We'll see if we can't do something. And in the meantime don't make a stranger of me. Any-

thing does for me. Lord bless you! if you were to see how I rough it sometimes! I can eat beans and bacon with any one; and what's more, I can go without 'em if I can't get 'em."

"We'd better get ready for dinner now. I always dress, because papa likes to see it." This she said as a hint to her cousin that he would be expected to change his coat, for her father would have been annoyed had his guest sat down to dinner without such ceremony. Will Belton was not very good at taking hints; but he did understand this, and made the necessary change in his apparel.

"The evening was long and dull, and nothing occurred worthy of remark except the surprise manifested by Mr. Amedroz when Belton called his daughter by her Christian name. This he did without the slightest hesitation, as though it were the most natural thing in the world for him to do. She was his cousin, and cousins of course addressed each other in that way. Clara's quick eye immediately saw her father's slight gesture of dismay, but Belton caught nothing of this. The squire

took an early opportunity of calling him Mr. Belton with some little peculiarity of expression; but this was altogether lost upon Will, who five times in the next five minutes addressed "Clara" as though they were already on the most intimate terms. She would have answered him in the same way, and would have called him Will, had she not been afraid of offending her father.

Mr. Amedroz had declared his purpose of coming down to breakfast during the period of his cousin's visit, and at half-past nine he was in the parlour. Clara had been there some time, but had not seen her cousin. He entered the room immediately after her father, bringing his hat with him in his hand, and wiping the drops of perspiration from his brow. "You have been out, Mr. Belton," said the squire.

"All round the place, sir. Six o'clock doesn't often find me in bed, summer or winter. What's the use of laying in bed when one has had enough of sleep?"

"But that's just the question," said Clara; "whether one has had enough at six o'clock."

"Women want more than men, of course. A man, if he means to do any good with land, must be out early. The grass will grow of itself at nights, but it wants looking after as soon as the daylight comes."

"I don't know that it would do much good to the grass here," said the squire, mournfully.

"As much here as anywhere. And indeed I've got something to say about that." He had now seated himself at the breakfast-table, and was playing with his knife and fork. "I think, sir, you're hardly making the best you can out of the park."

"We won't mind talking about it, if you please," said the squire.

"Well; of course I won't, if you don't like it; but upon my word you ought to look about you; you ought indeed."

"In what way do you mean?" said Clara.

"If your father doesn't like to keep the land in his own hands, he should let it to some one who would put stock in it,—not go on cutting it year, after year, and putting nothing back, as

this fellow will do. I've been talking to Stovey, and that's just what he means."

"Nobody here has got money to put stock on the land," said the squire, angrily.

"Then you should look for somebody somewhere else. That's all. I'll tell you what now, Mr. Amedroz, I'll do it myself." By this time he had helped himself to two large slices of cold mutton, and was eating his breakfast and talking with an equal amount of energy for either occupation.

"That's out of the question," said the squire.

"I don't see why it should be out of the question. It would be better for you,—and better for me too, if this place is ever to be mine." On hearing this the squire winced, but said nothing. This terrible fellow was so vehemently outspoken that the poor old man was absolutely unable to keep pace with him,—even to the repeating of his wish that the matter should be talked of no further. "I'll tell you what I'll do, now," continued Belton. "There's altogether, outside the palings and in,

about a hundred and fifty acres of it. I'll give you one pound two and sixpence an acre, and I won't cut an acre of grass inside the park;—no, nor much of it outside either;—only just enough to give me a little fodder for the cattle in winter."

"And give up Plaistow Hall?" asked Clara.

"Lord love you, no. I've a matter of nine hundred acres on hand there, and most of it under the plough. I've counted it up, and it would just cost me a thousand pounds to stock this place. I should come and look at it twice a year or so, and I should see my money home again, if I didn't get any profit out of it."

Mr. Amedroz was astonished. The man had only been in his house one night, and was proposing to take all his troubles off his hands. He did not relish the proposition at all. He did not like to be accused of not doing as well for himself as others could do for him. He did not wish to make any change,—although he remembered at the moment his anger with Farmer Stovey respecting the haycarts. He did not desire that the heir should have

any immediate interest in the place. But he was not strong enough to meet the proposition with a direct negative. "I couldn't get rid of Stovey in that way," he said, plaintively.

"I've settled it all with Stovey already," said Belton. "He'll be glad enough to walk off with a twenty-pound note, which I'll give him. He can't make money out of the place. He hasn't got means to stock it, and then see the wages that hay-making runs away with! He'd lose by it even at what he's paying, and he knows it. There won't be any difficulty about Stovey."

By twelve o'clock on that day Mr. Stovey had been brought into the house, and had resigned the land. It had been let to Mr. William Belton at an increased rental, — a rental increased by nearly forty pounds per annum, — and that gentleman had already made many of his arrangements for entering upon his tenancy. The twenty pounds had already been paid to Stovey, and the transaction was complete. Mr. Amedroz sat in his

chair bewildered, dismayed—and, as he himself declared,—shocked, quite shocked, at the precipitancy of the young man. It might be for the best. He didn't know. He didn't feel at all sure. But such hurrying in such a matter was, under all the circumstances of the family, to say the least of it, very indelicate. He was angry with himself for having yielded, and angry with Clara for having allowed him to do so. "It doesn't signify much," he said, at last. "Of course he'll have it all to himself before long."

"But, papa, it really seems to be a much better arrangement for you. You'll get more money——"

"Money is not everything, my dear."

"But you'd sooner have Mr. Belton, our own cousin, about the place, than Mr. Stovey."

"I dont know. We shall see. The thing is done now, and there is no use in complaining. I must say he hasn't shown a great deal of delicacy."

On that afternoon Belton asked Clara to go out with him, and walk round the place. He

had been again about the grounds, and had made plans, and counted up capabilities, and calculated his profit and losses. "If you don't dislike scrambling about," said he, "I'll show you everything that I intend to do."

"But I can't have any changes made, Mr. Belton," said Mr. Amedroz, with some affectation of dignity in his manner. "I won't have the fences moved, or anything of that kind."

"Nothing shall be done, sir, that you don't approve. I'll just manage it all as if I was acting as your own——bailiff." "Son," he was going to say, but he remembered the fate of his cousin Charles just in time to prevent the use of the painful word.

"I don't want to have anything done" said Mr. Amedroz.

"Then nothing shall be done. We'll just mend a fence or two, to keep in the cattle, and leave other things as they are. But perhaps Clara will walk out with me all the same."

Clara was quite ready to walk out, and had already tied on her hat and taken her parasol.

"Your father is a little nervous," said he,

as soon as they were beyond hearing of the house.

"Can you wonder at it, when you remember all that he has suffered?"

"I don't wonder at it in the least; and I don't wonder at his disliking me either."

"I don't think he dislikes you Mr. Belton."

"Oh, but he does. Of course he does. I'm the heir to the place instead of you. It is natural that he should dislike me. But I'll live it down. You see if I don't. I'll make him so fond of me, he'll always want to have me here. I don't mind a little dislike to begin with."

"You're a wonderful man, Mr. Belton."

"I wish you wouldn't call me Mr. Belton. But of course you must do as you please about that. If I can make him call me Will, I suppose you'll call me so too."

"Oh, yes; then I will."

"It don't much matter what a person is called; does it? Only one likes to be friendly with one's friends. I suppose you don't like my calling you Clara."

"Now you've begun you had better go on."

"I mean to. I make it a rule never to go back in the world. Your father is half sorry that he has agreed about the place; but I shan't let him off now. And I'll tell you what. In spite of what he says, I'll have it as different as possible before this time next year. Why, there's lots of timber that ought to come out of the plantation; and there's places where the roots want stubbing up horribly. These things always pay for themselves if they are properly done. Any good done in the world always pays." Clara often remembered those words afterwards when she was thinking of her cousin's character. Any good done in the world always pays!

"But you mustn't offend my father, even though it should do good," she said.

"I understand," he answered. "I won't tread on his toes. Where do you get your milk and butter?"

"We buy them."

"From Stovey, I suppose."

"Yes; from Mr. Stovey. It goes against the rent."

"And it ought to go against the grain too,—living in the country and paying for milk! I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you a cow. It shall be a little present from me to you." He said nothing of the more important present which this would entail upon him in the matter of the grass for the cow; but she understood the nature of the arrangement, and was anxious to prevent it.

"Oh, Mr. Belton, I think we'd better not attempt that," she said.

"But we will attempt it. I've pledged myself to do nothing to oppose your father; but I've made no such promise as to you. We'll have a cow before I'm many days older. What a pretty place this is! I do like these rocks so much, and it is such a comfort to be off the flat."

"It is pretty."

"Very pretty. You've no conception what an ugly place Plaistow is. The land isn't actual fen now, but it was once. And it's quite flat. And there is a great dike, twenty feet wide, oozing through it,—just oozing, you

know; and lots of little dikes, at right angles with the big one. And the fields are all square. And there are no hedges,—and hardly a tree to be seen in the place."

"What a picture you have drawn! I should commit suicide if I lived there."

"Not if you had so much to do as I have."

"And what is the house like?"

"The house is good enough, — an old-fashioned manor-house, with high brick chimneys, and brick gables, tiled all over, and large square windows set in stone. The house is good enough, only it stands in the middle of a farm-yard. I said there were no trees, but there is an avenue."

"Come, that's something."

"It was an old family seat, and they used to have avenues in those days; but it doesn't lead up to the present hall door. It comes sideways up to the farm-yard; so that the whole thing must have been different once, and there must have been a great court-yard. In Elizabeth's time Plaistow Manor was rather

a swell place, and belonged to some Roman Catholics who came to grief, and then the Howards got it. There's a whole history about it, only I don't much care about those things."

"And is it yours now?"

"It's between me and my uncle, and I pay him rent for his part. He's a clergyman you know, and he has a living in Lincolnshire,—not far of."

"And do you live alone in that big house?"

"There's my sister. You've heard of Mary;—haven't you?"

Then Clara remembered that there was a Miss Belton,—a poor sickly creature, with a twisted spine and a hump back, as to whose welfare she ought to have made inquiries.

Oh, yes; of course," said Clara. "I hope she's better than she used to be,—when we heard of her."

"She'll never be better. But then she does not become much worse. I think she does grow a little weaker. She's older than I am,

you know,—two years older; but you would think she was quite an old woman to look at ner." Then, for the next half-hour, they talked about Mary Belton as they visited every corner of the place. Belton still had an eye to business as he went on talking, and Clara remarked how many sticks he moved as he went, how many stones he kicked on one side, and how invariably he noted any defect in the fences. But still he talked of his sister, swearing that she was as good as gold, and at last wiping away the tears from his eyes as he described her maladies. "And yet I believe she is better off than any of us," he said, "because she is so good." Clara began to wish that she had called him Will from the beginning, because she liked him so much. He was just the man to have for a cousin,—a true loving cousin, stalwart, self-confident, with a grain or two of tyranny in his composition as becomes a man in relation to his intimate female relatives; and one, moreover, with whom could she trust herself to be familiar without any danger of love-making! She saw his character clearly, and told herself

that she understood it perfectly. He was a jewel of a cousin, and she must begin to call him Will as speedily as possible.

At last they came round in their walk to the gate leading into Colonel Askerton's garden; and here in the garden, close to the gate, they found Mrs. Askerton. I fancy that she had been watching for them, or at any rate watching for Clara, so that she might know how her friend was carrying herself with her cousin. She came at once to the wicket, and there she was introduced by Clara to Mr. Belton. Mr. Belton as he made his bow muttered something awkwardly, and seemed to lose his self-possession for the moment. Mrs. Askerton was very gracious to him, and she knew well how to be both gracious and ungracious. She talked about the scenery, and the charms of the old place, and the dullness of the people around them, and the inexpediency of looking for society in country places; till after awhile Mr. Belton was once more at his ease.

"How is Colonel Askerton?" asked Clara.

"He's in-doors. Will you come and see

him? He's reading a French novel, as usual. It's the only thing he ever does in summer. Do you ever read French novels, Mr. Belton?"

"I read very little at all, and when I do I read English."

"Ah, you're a man who has a pursuit in life, no doubt."

"I should rather think so,—that is, if you mean, by a pursuit, earning my bread. A man has not much time for French novels with a thousand acres of land on his hands; even if he knew how to read French, which I don't."

"But you're not always at work on your farm?"

"It's pretty constant, Mrs. Askerton. Then I shoot, and hunt."

"You're a sportsman?"

"All men living in the country are,—more or less."

"Colonel Askerton shoots a great deal. He has the shooting of Belton, you know. He'll be delighted, I'm sure, to see you if you are here some time in September. But you,

coming from Norfolk, would not care for partridge-shooting in Somersetshire."

"I don't see why it shouldn't be as good here as there."

"Colonel Askerton thinks he has got a fair head of game upon the place."

"I dare say. Game is easily kept if people knew how to set about it."

"Colonel Askerton has a very good keeper, and has gone to a great deal of expense since he has been here."

"I'm my own head-keeper," said Belton; "and so I will be,—or rather should be, if I had this place."

Something in the lady's tone had grated against his feelings and offended him; or perhaps he thought that she assumed too many of the airs of proprietorship because the shooting of the place had been let to her husband for thirty pounds a-year.

"I hope you don't mean to say you'll turn us out," said Mrs. Askerton, laughing.

"I have no power to turn anybody out or in," said he. "I've got nothing to do with it."

Clara, perceiving that matters were not going quite pleasantly between her old and new friend, thought it best to take her departure. Belton, as he went, lifted his hat from his head, and Clara could not keep herself from thinking that he was not only very handsome, but that he looked very much like a gentleman, in spite of his occupation as a farmer.

"By-bye, Clara," said Mrs. Askerton; "come down and see me to-morrow, there's a dear. Don't forget what a dull life I have of it." Clara said that she would come. "And I shall be so happy to see Mr. Belton if he will call before he leaves you." At this Belton again raised his hat from his head, and muttered some word or two of civility. But this, his latter muttering, was different from the first, for he had altogether regained his presence of mind.

"You didn't seem to get on very well with my friend," said Clara, laughing, as soon as they had turned away from the cottage.

"Well, no;—that is to say, not particularly well or particularly badly. At first I took her

for somebody else I knew slightly ever so long ago, and I was thinking of that other person at the time."

"And what was the other person's name?"

"I can't even remember that at the present moment."

"Mrs. Askerton was a Miss Oliphant."

"That wasn't the other lady's name. But, independently of that, they can't be the same. The other lady married a Mr. Berdmore."

"A Mr. Berdmore!" Clara as she repeated the name felt convinced that she had heard it before, and that she had heard it in connection with Mrs. Askerton. She certainly had heard the name of Berdmore pronounced, or had seen it written, or had in some shape come across the name in Mrs. Askerton's presence; or at any rate somewhere on the premises occupied by that lady. More than this she could not remember; but the name, as she had now heard it from her cousin, became at once distinctly connected in her memory with her friends at the cottage.

"Yes," said Belton; "a Mr. Berdmore. I

knew more of him than of her, though for the matter of that, I knew very little of him either. She was a fast-going girl, and his friends were very sorry. But I think they are both dead or divorced, or that they have come to grief in some way."

"And is Mrs. Askerton like the fast-going lady?"

"In a certain way. Not that I remember what the fast-going lady was like; but there was something about this woman that put me in mind of the other. Vigo was her name; now I recollect it,—a Miss Vigo. It's nine or ten years ago now, and I was little more than a boy."

"Her name was Oliphant."

"I don't suppose they have anything to do with each other. What riled me was the way she talked of the shooting. People do when they take a little shooting. They pay some trumpery thirty or forty pounds a year, and then they seem to think that it's almost the same as though they owned the property themselves. I've known a man talk of his manor

because he had the shooting of a wood and a small farm round it. They are generally shopkeepers out of London, gin distillers, or brewers, or people like that."

"Why, Mr. Belton, I didn't think you could be so furious!"

"Can't I? When my back's up, it is up! But it isn't up yet."

"And I hope it won't be up while you remain in Somersetshire."

"I won't answer for that. There's Stovey's empty cart standing just where it stood yesterday; and he promised he'd have it home before three to-day. My back will be up with him if he doesn't mind himself."

It was nearly six o'clock when they got back to the house, and Clara was surprised to find that she had been out three hours with her cousin. Certainly it had been very pleasant. The usual companion of her walks, when she had a companion, was Mrs. Askerton; but Mrs. Askerton did not like real walking. She would creep about the grounds for an hour or so, and even such companionship as that was better to

Clara than absolute solitude; but now she had been carried about the place, getting over stiles and through gates, and wandering through the copses, till she was tired and hungry, and excited and happy. "Oh, papa," she said, "we have had such a walk!"

"I thought we were to have dined at five," he replied, in a low wailing voice.

"No, papa, indeed, — indeed you said six."

"That was for yesterday."

"You said we were to make it six while Mr. Belton was here."

"Very well;—if it must be, I suppose it must be."

"You don't mean on my account," said Will. "I'll undertake to eat my dinner, sir, at any hour that you'll undertake to give it me. If there's a strong point about me at all, it is my appetite."

Clara, when she went to her father's room that evening, told him what Mr. Belton had said about the shooting, knowing that her father's feelings would agree with those which

had been expressed by her cousin. Mr. Amedroz of course made this an occasion for further grumbling, suggesting that Belton wanted to get the shooting for himself as he had got the farm. But, nevertheless, the effect which Clara had intended was produced, and before she left him he had absolutely proposed that the shooting and the land should go together.

"I'm sure that Mr. Belton doesn't mean that at all," said Clara.

"I don't care what he means," said the squire.

"And it wouldn't do to treat Colonel Askerton in that way," said Clara.

"I shall treat him just as I like," said the squire.

CHAPTER IV.

SAFE AGAINST LOVE-MAKING.

A DEAR cousin, and safe against love-making! This was Clara's verdict respecting Will Belton, as she lay thinking of him in bed that night. Why that warranty against love-making should be a virtue in her eyes I cannot, perhaps, explain. But all young ladies are apt to talk to themselves in such phrases about gentlemen with whom they are thrown into chance intimacy;—as though love-making were in itself a thing injurious and antagonistic to happiness, instead of being, as it is, the very salt of life. Safe against love-making! And yet Mrs. Askerton, her friend, had spoken

of the probability of such love-making as being the great advantage of his coming. And there could not be a second opinion as to the expediency of a match between her and her cousin in a worldly point of view. Clara, moreover, had already perceived that he was a man fit to guide a wife, very good-humoured,—and good-tempered also, anxious to give pleasure to others, a man of energy and forethought, who would be sure to do well in the world and hold his head always high among his fellows;—as good a husband as a girl could have. Nevertheless, she congratulated herself in that she felt satisfied that he was safe against love-making! Might it be possible that that pressing of hands at Taunton had been so tender, and those last words spoken with Captain Aylmer so soft, that on his account she felt delighted to think that her cousin was warranted not to make love?

And what did Will Belton think about his cousin, insured as he was thus supposed to be against the dangers of love? He, also, lay awake for awhile that night, thinking over this

new friendship. Or rather he thought of it walking about his room, and looking out at the bright harvest moon;—for with him to be in bed was to be asleep. He sat himself down, and he walked about, and he leaned out of the window into the cool night air; and he made some comparisons in his mind, and certain calculations; and he thought of his present home, and of his sister, and of his future prospects as they were concerned with the old place at which he was now staying; and he portrayed to himself, in his mind, Clara's head and face and figure and feet;—and he resolved that she should be his wife. He had never seen a girl who seemed to suit him so well. Though he had only been with her for a day, he swore to himself that he knew he could love her. Nay;—he swore to himself that he did love her. Then,—when he had quite made up his mind, he tumbled into his bed and was asleep in five minutes.

Miss Amedroz was a handsome young woman, tall, well-made, active, and full of health. She carried herself as though she

thought her limbs were made for use, and not simply for ease upon a sofa. Her head and neck stood well upon her shoulders, and her waist showed none of those waspish proportions of which ladies used to be more proud than I believe them to be now, in their more advanced state of knowledge and taste. There was much about her in which she was like her cousin, as though the blood they had in common between them had given to both the same proportions and the same comeliness. Her hair was of a dark brown colour, as was his. Her eyes were somewhat darker than his, and perhaps not so full of constant movement; but they were equally bright, and possessed that quick power of expressing tenderness which belonged to them. Her nose was more finely cut, as was also her chin, and the oval of her face; but she had the same large expressive mouth, and the same perfection of ivory-white teeth. As has been said before, Clara Amedroz, who was now nearly twenty-six years of age, was not a young-looking young woman. To the eyes of many men that would have been

her fault; but in the eyes of Belton it was no fault. He had not made himself fastidious as to women by much consort with them, and he was disposed to think that she who was to become his wife had better be something more than a girl not long since taken out of the nursery. He was well to do in the world, and could send his wife out in her carriage, with all becoming bravery of appurtenances. And he would do so, too, when he should have a wife. But still he would look to his wife to be a useful partner to him. She should be a woman not above agricultural solicitude, or too proud to have a care for her cows. Clara, he was sure, had no false pride; and yet,—as he was sure also, she was at every point such a lady as would do honour to the carriage and the bravery when it should be forthcoming. And then such a marriage as this would put an end to all the trouble which he felt in reference to the entail on the estate. He knew that he was to be master of Belton, and of course had, in that knowledge, the satisfaction which men do feel from the consciousness of

their future prosperity. And this with him was enhanced by a strong sympathy with old-fashioned prejudices as to family. He would be Belton of Belton; and there had been Beltons of Belton in old days, for a longer time backwards than he was able to count. But still the prospect had not been without its alloy, and he had felt real distress at the idea of turning his cousin out of her father's house. Such a marriage as that he now contemplated would put all these things right.

When he got up in the morning he was quite as keen about it as he had been on the previous evening;—and as he thought about it the more, he became keener and still more keen. On the previous evening, as he was leaning out of the window endeavouring to settle in his own mind what would be the proper conduct of the romance of the thing, he had considered that he had better not make his proposal quite at once. He was to remain eight days at Belton, and as eight days was not a long period of acquaintance he had reflected that it might be well for him to lay

what foundation for love it might be in his power to construct during his present sojourn, and then return and complete the work before Christmas. But as he was shaving himself, the habitual impatience of his nature predominated, and he became disposed to think that delay would be useless, and might perhaps be dangerous. It might be possible that Clara would be unable to give him a decisive answer so quickly as to enable him to return home an accepted lover; but if such doubt were left, such doubt would give him an excuse for a speedy return to Belton. He did not omit to tell himself that very probably he might not succeed at all. He was a man not at all apt to feel assurance that he could carry all before him in love. But in this matter, as in all others which required from him any personal effort, he prepared himself to do his best, leaving the consequences to follow as they might. When he threw his seed corn into the earth with all such due appliances of agricultural skill and industry as his capital and experience enabled him to use, he did his

part towards the production of next year's crop; and after that he must leave it to a higher Power to give to him, or to withhold from him, the reward of his labour. He had found that, as a rule, the reward had been given when the labour had been honest; and he was now prepared to follow the same plan, with the same hopes, in this matter of his love-making.

After much consideration,—very much consideration, a consideration which took him the whole time that he was brushing his hair and washing his teeth,—he resolved that he would, in the first instance, speak to Mr. Amedroz. Not that he intended that the father should win the daughter for him. He had an idea that he would like to do that work for himself. But he thought that the old squire would be better pleased if his consent were asked in the first instance. The present day was Sunday, and he would not speak on the subject till Monday. This day he would devote to the work of securing his future father-in-law's good opinion; to that,—and to his prayers.

And he had gained very much upon Mr. Amedroz before the evening of the day was over. He was a man before whom difficulties seemed to yield, and who had his own way simply because he had become accustomed to ask for it,—to ask for it and to work for it. He had so softened the squire's tone of thought towards him, that the future stocking of the land was spoken of between them with something like energy on both sides; and Mr. Amedroz had given his consent, without any difficulty, to the building of a shed for winter stall-feeding. Clara sat by listening, and perceived that Will Belton would soon be allowed to do just what he pleased with the place Her father talked as she had not heard him talk since her poor brother's death, and was quite animated on the subject of woodcraft. "We don't know much about timber down where I am," said Will, "just because we've got no trees."

"I'll show you your way," said the old man. "I've managed the timber on the estate myself for the last forty years." Will Belton of

course did not say a word as to the gross mismanagement which had been apparent even to him. What a cousin he was! Clara thought, —what a paragon among cousins! And then he was so manifestly safe against love-making! So safe, that he only cared to talk about timber, and oxen, and fences, and winter-forage! But it was all just as it ought to be; and if her father did not call him Will before long, she herself would set the way by doing so first. A very paragon among cousins!

"What a flatterer you are," she said to him that night.

"A flatterer! I?"

"Yes, you. You have flattered papa out of all his animosity already. I shall be jealous soon; for he'll think more of you than of me."

"I hope he'll come to think of us as being nearly equally near to him," said Belton, with a tone that was half serious and half tender. Now that he had made up his mind, he could not keep his hand from the work before him an instant. But Clara had also made up her

mind, and would not be made to think that her cousin could mean anything that was more than cousinly.

"Upon my word," she said, laughing, "that is very cool on your part."

"I came here determined to be friends with him at any rate."

"And you did so without any thought of me. But you said you would be my brother, and I shall not forget your promise. Indeed, indeed, I cannot tell you how glad I am that you have come,—both for papa's sake and my own. You have done him so much good that I only dread to think that you are going so soon."

"I'll be back before long. I think nothing of running across here from Norfolk. You'll see enough of me before next summer."

Soon after breakfast on the next morning he got Mr. Amedroz out into the grounds, on the plea of showing him the proposed site for the cattle shed; but not a word was said about the shed on that occasion. He went to work at his other task at once, and when that was

well on hand the squire was quite unfitted for the consideration of any less important matter, however able to discuss it Belton might have been himself.

"I've got something particular that I want to say to you, sir," Belton began.

Now Mr. Amedroz was of opinion that his cousin had been saying something very particular ever since his arrival, and was rather frightened at this immediate prospect of a new subject.

"There's nothing wrong; is there?"

"No, nothing wrong;—at least, I hope it's not wrong. Would not it be a good plan, sir, if I were to marry my cousin Clara?"

What a terrible young man! Mr. Amedroz felt that his breath was so completely taken away from him that he was quite unable to speak a word of answer at the moment. Indeed, he was unable to move, and stood still, where he had been fixed by the cruel suddenness of the proposition made to him.

"Of course I know nothing of what she may think about it," continued Belton. "I thought

it best to come to you before I spoke a word to her. And I know that in many ways she is above me. She is better educated, and reads more, and all that sort of thing. And it may be that she'd rather marry a London man than a fellow who passes all his time in the country. But she couldn't get one who would love her better or treat her more kindly. And then as to the property; you must own it would be a good arrangement. You'd like to know it would go to your own child and your own grandchild;—wouldn't you, sir? And I'm not badly off, without looking to this place at all, and could give her everything she wants. But then I don't know that she'd care to marry a farmer." These last words he said in a melancholy tone, as though aware that he was confessing his own disgrace.

The squire had listened to it all, and had not as yet said a word. And now, when Belton ceased, he did not know what word to speak. He was a man whose thoughts about women were chivalrous, and perhaps a little old-fashioned. Of course, when a man contem-

plates marriage, he could do nothing better, nothing more honourable, than consult the lady's father in the first instance. But he felt that even a father should be addressed on such a subject with great delicacy. There should be ambages in such a matter. The man who resolved to commit himself to such a task should come forward with apparent difficulty, —with great diffidence, and even with actual difficulty. He should keep himself almost hidden, as behind a mask, and should tell of his own ambition with doubtful, quivering voice. And the ambages should take time. He should approach the citadel to be taken with covered ways,—working his way slowly and painfully. But this young man, before he had been in the house three days, said all that he had to say without the slightest quaver in his voice, and evidently expected to get an answer about the squire's daughter as quickly as he had got it about the squire's land.

"You have surprised me very much," said the old man at last, drawing his breath.

"I'm quite in earnest about it. Clara seems

to me to be the very girl to make a good wife to such a one as I am. She's got everything that a woman ought to have;—by George she has!"

"She is a good girl, Mr. Belton."

"She is as good as gold, every inch of her."

"But you have not known her very long, Mr. Belton."

"Quite long enough for my purposes. You see I knew all about her beforehand,—who she is, and where she comes from. There's a great deal in that, you know."

Mr. Amedroz shuddered at the expressions used. It was grievous to him to hear his daughter spoken of as one respecting whom some one knew who she was and whence she came. Such knowledge respecting the daughter of such a family was, as a matter of course, common to all polite persons. "Yes," said Mr. Amedroz, stiffly: "you know as much as that about her, certainly."

"And she knows as much about me. Now the question is, whether you have any objection to make?"

"Really Mr. Belton, you have taken me so much by surprise that I do not feel myself competent to answer you at once."

"Shall we say in an hour's time, sir?" An hour's time! Mr. Amedroz, if he could have been left to his own guidance, would have thought a month very little for such a work.

"I suppose you would wish me to see Clara first," said Mr. Amedroz.

"Oh dear, no. I would much rather ask her myself;—if only I could get your consent to my doing so."

"And you have said nothing to her?"

"Not a word."

"I am glad of that. You would have behaved badly, I think, had you done so while staying under my roof."

"I thought it best, at any rate, to come to you first. But as I must be back at Plaistow on this day week, I haven't much time to lose. So if you could think about it this afternoon, you know——"

Mr. Amedroz, much bewildered, promised that he would do his best, and eventually did

bring himself to give an answer on the next morning. "I have been thinking about this all night," said Mr. Amedroz.

"I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you," said Belton, feeling rather ashamed of his own remissness as he remembered how soundly he had himself slept.

"If you are quite sure of yourself——"

"Do you mean sure of loving her? I am as sure of that as anything."

"But men are so apt to change their fancies."

"I don't know much about my fancies; but I don't often change my purpose when I'm in earnest. In such a matter as this I couldn't change. I'll say as much as that for myself, though it may seem bold."

"Of course, in regard to money such a marriage would be advantageous to my child. I don't know whether you know it, but I shall have nothing to give her—literally nothing."

"All the better, sir, as far as I am concerned. I'm not one who wants to be saved from working by a wife's fortune."

"But most men like to get something when they marry."

"I want to get nothing;—nothing, that is, in the way of money. If Clara becomes my wife I'll never ask you for one shilling."

"I hope her aunt will do something for her." This the old man said in a wailing voice, as though the expression of such a hope was grievous to him.

"If she becomes my wife, Mrs. Winterfield will be quite at liberty to leave her money elsewhere." There were old causes of dislike between Mr. Belton and Mrs. Winterfield, and even now Mrs. Winterfield was almost offended because Mr. Belton was staying at Belton Castle.

"But all that is quite uncertain," continued Mr. Amedroz.

"And I have your leave to speak to Clara myself?"

"Well, Mr. Belton; yes; I think so. I do not see why you should not speak to her. But I fear you are a little too precipitate. Clara has known you so very short a time, that

you can hardly have a right to hope that she should learn to regard you at once as you would have her do." As he heard this, Belton's face became long and melancholy. He had taught himself to think that he could dispense with that delay till Christmas which he had at first proposed to himself, and that he might walk into the arena at once, and perhaps win the battle in the first round. "Three days is such a very short time," said the squire.

"It is short certainly," said Belton.

The father's leave was however given, and armed with that, Belton was resolved that he would take, at any rate, some preliminary steps in love-making before he returned to Plaistow. What would be the nature of the preliminary steps taken by such a one as him, the reader by this time will probably be able to surmise.

CHAPTER V.

NOT SAFE AGAINST LOVE-MAKING.

"Why don't you call him Will?" Clara said to her father. This question was asked on the evening of that Monday on which Mr. Amedroz had given his consent as to the marriage proposal.

"Call him Will! Why should I?"

"You used to do so, when he was a boy,"

"Of course I did; but that is years ago. He would think it impertinent now."

"Indeed he would not; he would like it. He has told me so. It sounds so cold to him to be called Mr. Belton by his relations."

The father looked at his daughter as though

for a moment he almost suspected that matters had really been arranged between her and her future lover without his concurrence, and before his sanction had been obtained. But if for a moment such a thought did cross his mind, it did not dwell there. He trusted Belton; but as to his daughter, he knew that he might be sure of her. It would be impossible with her to keep such a secret from him, even for half a day. And yet, how odd it was! Here was a man who in three days had fallen in love with his daughter; and here was his daughter apparently quite as ready to be in love with the man. How could she, who was ordinarily circumspect, and almost cold in her demeanour towards strangers—who was from circumstances and from her own disposition altogether hostile to flirting intimacies—how could his Clara have changed her nature so speedily? The squire did not understand it, but was prepared to believe that it was all for the best. "I'll call him Will, if you like it," said he.

"Do, papa, and then I can do so also. He

is such a good fellow, and I am so fond of him."

On the next morning Mr. Amedroz did, with much awkwardness, call his guest by his Christian name. Clara caught her cousin's eye and smiled, and he also smiled. At that moment he was more in love than ever. Could anything be more charming than this. Immediately after breakfast he was going over to Redicote, to see a builder in a small way who lived there, and whom he proposed to employ in putting up the shed for the cattle; but he almost begrudged the time, so anxious was he to begin his suit. But his plan had been laid out and he would follow it. "I think I shall be back by three o'clock," he said to Clara, "and then we'll have our walk."

"I'll be ready; and you can call for me at Mrs. Askerton's. I must go down there, and it will save you something in your walk to pick me up at the cottage." And so the arrangements for the day were made.

Clara had promised that she would soon call at the cottage, and was, indeed, rather anxious

to see Mrs. Askerton on her own account, What she had heard from her cousin as to a certain Miss Vigo of old days had interested her, and also what she had heard of a certain Mr. Berdmore. It had been evident to her that her cousin had thought little about it. The likeness of the lady he then saw to the lady he had before known, had at first struck him; but when he found that the two ladies were not represented by one and the same person, he was satisfied, and there was an end of the matter for him. But it was not so with Clara. Her feminine mind dwelt on the matter with more earnestness than he had cared to entertain, and her clearer intellect saw possibilities which did not occur to him. But it was not till she found herself walking across the park to the cottage that she remembered that any inquiries as to her past life might be disagreeable to Mrs. Askerton. She had thought of asking her friend plainly whether the names of Vigo and Berdmore had ever been familiar to her; but she reminded herself that there had been rumours afloat, and that

there might be a mystery. Mrs. Askerton would sometimes talk of her early life; but she would do this with dreamy, indistinct language, speaking of the sorrows of her girlhood, but not specifying their exact nature, seldom mentioning any names, and never referring with clear personality to those who had been nearest to her when she had been a child. Clara had seen her friend's maiden name, Mary Oliphant, written in a book, and seeing it had alluded to it. On that occasion Mrs. Askerton had spoken of herself as having been an Oliphant, and thus Clara had come to know the fact. But now, as she made her way to the cottage, she remembered that she had learned nothing more than this as to Mrs. Askerton's early life. Such being the case, she hardly knew how to ask any question about the two names that had been mentioned. And yet, why should she not ask such a question? Why should she doubt Mrs. Askerton? And if she did doubt, why should not her doubts be solved?

She found Colonel Askerton and his wife

together, and she certainly would ask no such question in his presence. He was a slight built, wiry man, about fifty, with iron-grey hair and beard, — who seemed to have no trouble in life, and to desire but few pleasures. Nothing could be more regular than the course of his days, and nothing more idle. He breakfasted at eleven, smoked and read till the afternoon when he rode for an hour or two; then he dined, read again, smoked again, and went to bed. In September and October he shot, and twice in the year, as has been before stated, went away to seek a little excitement elsewhere. He seemed to be quite contented with his lot, and was never heard to speak an angry word to any one. Nobody cared for him much; but then he troubled himself with no one's affairs. He never went to church, and had not eaten or drank in any house but his own since he had come to Belton.

"Oh, Clara, you naughty girl," said Mrs. Askerton, "why didn't you come yesterday? I was expecting you all day."

"I was busy. Really, we've grown to

be quite industrious people since my cousin came."

"They tell me he's taking the land into his own hands," said the Colonel.

"Yes, indeed; and he is going to build sheds, and buy cattle; and I don't know what he doesn't mean to do; so that we shall be alive again."

"I hope he won't want my shooting."

"He has shooting of his own in Norfolk," said Clara.

"Then he'll hardly care to come here for that purpose. When I heard of his proceedings I began to be afraid."

"I don't think he would do anything to annoy you for the world," said Clara, enthusiastically. "He's the most unselfish person I ever met."

"He'd have a perfect right to take the shooting if he liked it,—that is always supposing that he and your father agreed about it."

"They agree about everything now. He has altogether disarmed papa's prejudices, and it seems to be recognised that he is to have his

own way about the place. But I don't think he'll interfere about the shooting."

"He won't, my dear, if you ask him not," said Mrs. Askerton.

"I'll ask him in a moment if Colonel Askerton wishes it."

"Oh dear no," said he. "It would be teaching the ostler to grease the horse's teeth. Perhaps he hasn't thought of it."

"He thinks of everything," said Clara.

"I wonder whether he's thinking of——." So far Mrs. Askerton spoke, and then she paused. Colonel Askerton looked up at Clara with an ill-natured smile, and Clara felt that she blushed. Was it not cruel that she could not say a word in favour of a friend and a cousin,—a cousin who had promised to be a brother to her, without being treated with such words and such looks as these? But she was determined not to be put down. "I'm quite sure of this," she said, "that my cousin would do nothing unfair or ungentlemanlike."

"There would be nothing unfair or ungentlemanlike in it. I shouldn't take it amiss

at all;—but I should simply take up my bed and walk. Pray tell him that I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing him before he goes. I did call yesterday, but he was out."

"He'll be here soon. He's to come here for me." But Colonel Askerton's horse was brought to the door, and he could not therefore wait to make Mr. Belton's acquaintance on that occasion.

"What a phœnix this cousin of yours is," said Mrs. Askerton, as soon as her husband was gone.

"He is a splendid fellow;—he is indeed. There's so much life about him! He's always doing something. He says that doing good will always pay in the long run. Isn't that a fine doctrine?"

"Quite a practical phœnix!"

"It has done papa so much good! At this moment he's out somewhere, thinking of what is going on, instead of moping in the house. He couldn't bear the idea of Will's coming, and now he is already beginning to complain because he's going away."

"Will, indeed!"

"And why not Will? He's my cousin."

"Yes;—ten times removed. But so much the better if he's to be anything more than a cousin."

"He is to be nothing more, Mrs. Askerton."

"You're quite sure of that?"

"I am quite sure of it. And I cannot understand why there should be such a suspicion because he and I are thrown closely together, and are fond of each other. Whether he is a sixth, eighth, or tenth cousin makes no difference. He is the nearest I have on that side; and since my poor brother's death he is papa's heir. It is so natural that he should be my friend;—and such a comfort that he should be such a friend as he is! I own it seems cruel to me that under such circumstances there should be any suspicion."

"Suspicion, my dear;—suspicion of what?"

"Not that I care for it. I am prepared to love him as if he were my brother. I think him one of the finest creatures I ever knew,—perhaps the finest I ever did know. His

energy and good-nature together are just the qualities to make the best kind of man. I am proud of him as my friend and my cousin, and now you may suspect what you please."

"But, my dear, why should not he fall in love with you? It would be the most proper, and also the most convenient thing in the world."

"I hate talking of falling in love;—as though a woman has nothing else to think of whenever she sees a man."

"A woman has nothing else to think of."

"I have,—a great deal else. And so has he."

"It's quite out of the question on his part, then?"

"Quite out of the question. I'm sure he likes me. I can see it in his face, and hear it in his voice, and am so happy that it is so. But it isn't the way in that you mean. Heaven knows that I may want a friend some of these days, and I feel that I may trust to him. His feelings to me will be always those of a brother."

"Perhaps so. I have seen that fraternal

love before under similar circumstances, and it has always ended in the same way."

"I hope it won't end in any way between us."

"But the joke is that this suspicion, as you call it,—which makes you so indignant,—is simply a suggestion that a thing should happen which, of all things in the world, would be the best for both of you."

"But the thing won't happen, and therefore let there be an end of it. I hate the twaddle talk of love, whether it's about myself or about any one else. It makes me feel ashamed of my sex, when I find that I cannot talk of myself to another woman without being supposed to be either in love or thinking of love,—either looking for it or avoiding it. When it comes, if it comes prosperously, it's a very good thing. But I for one can do without it, and I feel myself injured when such a state of things is presumed to be impossible."

"It is worth any one's while to irritate you, because your indignation is so beautiful."

"It is not beautiful to me; for I always feel

ashamed afterwards of my own energy. And now, if you please, we won't say anything more about Mr. Will Belton."

"May I not talk about him, even as the enterprising cousin?"

"Certainly; and in any other light you please. Do you know he seemed to think that he had known you ever so many years ago." Clara, as she said this, did not look direct at her friend's face; but still she could perceive that Mrs. Askerton was disconcerted. There came a shade of paleness over her face, and a look of trouble on her brow, and for a moment or two she made no reply.

"Did he?" she then said. "And when was that?"

"I suppose it was in London. But, after all, I believe it was not you, but somebody whom he remembers to have been like you. He says that the lady was a Miss Vigo." As she pronounced the name, Clara turned her face away, feeling instinctively that it would be kind to do so.

"Miss Vigo!" said Mrs. Askerton at once;

and there was that in the tone of her voice which made Clara feel that all was not right with her. "I remember that there were Miss Vigos; two of them, I think. I didn't know that they were like me especially."

"And he says that the one he remembers married a Mr. Berdmore."

"Married a Mr. Berdmore!" The tone of voice was still the same, and there was an evident struggle, as though the woman was making a vehement effort to speak in her natural voice. Then Clara looked at her, feeling that if she abstained from doing so, the very fact of her so abstaining would be remarkable. There was the look of pain on Mrs. Askerton's brow, and her cheeks were still pale, but she smiled as she went on speaking. "I'm sure I'm flattered, for I remember that they were both considered beauties. Did he know anything more of her?"

"No; nothing more."

"There must have been some casual likeness I suppose." Mrs. Askerton was a clever woman, and had by this time almost recovered

her self-possession. Then there came a ring at the front door, and in another minute Mr. Belton was in the room. Mrs. Askerton felt that it was imperative on her to make some allusion to the conversation which had just taken place, and dashed at the subject at once. "Clara tells me that I am exactly like some old friend of yours, Mr. Belton."

Then he looked at her closely as he answered her. "I have no right to say that she was my friend, Mrs. Askerton," he said; "indeed there was hardly what might be called an acquaintance between us; but you certainly are extremely like a certain Miss Vigo that I remember."

"I often wonder that one person isn't more often found to be like another," said Mrs. Askerton.

"People often are like," said he; "but not like in such a way as to give rise to mistakes as to identity. Now, I should have stopped you in the street and called you Mrs. Berdmore."

"Didn't I once see or hear the name of Berdmore in this house?" asked Clara.

Then that look of pain returned. Mrs. Askerton had succeeded in recovering the usual tone of her countenance, but now she was once more disturbed. "I think I know the name," said she.

"I fancy that I have seen it in this house," said Clara.

"You may more likely have heard it, my dear. My memory is very poor, but if I remember rightly, Colonel Askerton did know a Captain Berdmore,—a long while ago, before he was married; and you may probably have heard him mention the name." This did not quite satisfy Clara, but she said nothing more about it then. If there was a mystery which Mrs. Askerton did not wish to have explored, why should she explore it?

Soon after this Clara got up to go, and Mrs. Askerton, making another attempt to be cheerful, was almost successful. "So you're going back into Norfolk on Saturday, Clara tells me. You are making a very short visit now that you're come among us."

"It is a long time for me to be away from

home. Farmers can hardly ever dare to leave their work. But in spite of my farm, I am talking of coming here again about Christmas."

"But you are going to have a farming establishment here too?"

"That will be nothing. Clara will look after that for me; will you not?" Then they went, and Belton had to consider how he would begin the work before him. He had some idea that too much precipitancy might do him an injury, but he hardly knew how to commence without coming to the point at once. When they were out together in the park, he went back at first to the subject of Mrs. Askerton.

"I would almost have sworn they were one and the same woman," he said.

"But you see that they are not."

"It's not only the likeness, but the voice. It so chanced that I once saw that Miss Vigo in some trouble. I happened to meet her in company with a man who was,—who was tipsy, in fact, and I had to relieve her."

"Dear me,—how disagreeable!"

"It's a long time ago, and there can't be any harm in mentioning it now. It was the man she was going to marry, and whom she did marry."

"What;— the Mr. Berdmore?"

"Yes; he was often in that way. And there was a look about Mrs. Askerton just now so like the look of that Miss Vigo then, that I cannot get rid of the idea."

"They can't be the same, as she was certainly a Miss Oliphant. And you hear, too, what she says."

"Yes;—I heard what she said. You have known her long?"

"These two years."

"And intimately?"

"Very intimately. She is our only neighbour; and her being here has certainly been a great comfort to me. It is sad not having some woman near one that one can speak to;—and then, I really do like her very much."

"No doubt it's all right."

"Yes; it's all right," said Clara. After that there was nothing more said about Mrs. Askerton, and Belton began his work. They had gone from the cottage, across the park, away from the house, up to a high rock which stood boldly out of the ground, from whence could be seen the sea on one side, and on the other a far tract of country almost away to the moors. And when they reached this spot they seated themselves. "There," said Clara, "I consider this to be the prettiest spot in England."

"I haven't seen all England," said Belton.

"Don't be so matter-of-fact, Will. I say it's the prettiest in England, and you can't contradict me."

"And I say you're the prettiest girl in England, and you can't contradict me."

This annoyed Clara, and almost made her feel that her paragon of a cousin was not quite so perfect as she had represented him to be. "I see," she said, "that if I talk nonsense I'm to be punished."

"Is it a punishment to you to know that I

think you very handsome?" he said, turning round and looking full into her face.

"It is disagreeable to me—very, to have any such subject talked about at all. What would you think if I began to pay you foolish personal compliments?"

"What I say isn't foolish; and there's a great difference. Clara, I love you better than all the world put together."

She now looked at him; but still she did not believe it. It could not be that after all her boastings she should have made so gross a blunder. "I hope you do love me," she said; "indeed, you are bound to do so, for you promised that you would be my brother."

"But that will not satisfy me now, Clara. Clara, I want to be your husband."

"Will!" she exclaimed.

"Now you know it all; and if I have been too sudden, I must beg your pardon."

"Oh, Will, forget that you have said this. Do not go on until everything must be over between us."

"Why should anything be over between

us? Why should it be wrong in me to love you?"

"What will papa say?"

"Mr. Amedroz knows all about it already, and has given me his consent. I asked him directly I had made up my own mind, and he told me that I might go to you."

"You have asked papa? Oh dear, oh dear, what am I to do?"

"Am I so odious to you then?" As he said this he got up from his seat and stood before her. He was a tall, well-built, handsome man, and he could assume a look and mien that were almost noble when he was moved as he was moved now.

"Odious! Do you not know that I have loved you as my cousin—that I have already learned to trust you as though you were really my brother? But this breaks it all."

"You cannot love me then as my wife?"

"No." She pronounced the monosyllable alone, and then he walked away from her as though that one little word settled the question for him, now and for ever. He

walked away from her, perhaps a distance of two hundred yards, as though the interview was over, and he were leaving her. She, as she saw him go, wished that he would return that she might say some word of comfort to him. Not that she could have said the only word that would have comforted him. At the first blush of the thing, at the first sound of the address which he had made to her, she had been angry with him. He had disappointed her, and she was indignant. But her anger had already melted and turned itself to ruth. She could not but love him better, in that he had loved her so well; but yet she could not love him with the love which he desired.

But he did not leave her. When he had gone from her down the hill the distance that has been named, he turned back, and came up to her slowly. He had a trick of standing and walking with his thumbs fixed into the armholes of his waistcoat, while his large hands rested on his breast. He would always assume this attitude when he was assured that

he was right in his views, and was eager to carry some point at issue. Clara already understood that this attitude signified his intention to be autocratic. He now came close up to her, and again stood over her, before he spoke. "My dear," he said, "I have been rough and hasty in what I have said to you, and I have to ask you to pardon my want of manners."

"No, no, no," she exclaimed.

"But in a matter of so much interest to us both you will not let an awkward manner prejudice me."

"It is not that; indeed, it is not."

"Listen to me, dearest. It is true that I promised to be your brother, and I will not break my word unless I break it by your own sanction. I did promise to be your brother, but I did not know then how fondly I should come to love you. Your father, when I told him of this, bade me not to be hasty; but I am hasty, and I haven't known how to wait. Tell me that I may come at Christmas for my answer, and I will not say a word to trouble

you till then. I will be your brother, at any rate till Christmas."

"Be my brother always."

A black cloud crossed his brow as this request reached his ears. She was looking anxiously into his face, watching every turn in the expression of his countenance. "Will you not let it wait till Christmas?" he asked.

She thought it would be cruel to refuse this request, and yet she knew that no such waiting could be of service to him. He had been awkward in his love-making, and was aware of it. He should have contrived this period of waiting for himself; giving her no option but to wait and think of it. He should have made no proposal, but have left her certain that such proposal was coming. In such case she must have waited—and if good could have come to him from that, he might have received it. But, as the question was now presented to her, it was impossible that she should consent to wait. To have given such consent would have been tantamount to receiving him as her lover. She was therefore forced to be cruel.

"It will be of no avail to postpone my answer when I know what it must be. Why should there be suspense?"

"You mean that it is impossible that you should love me?"

"Not in that way, Will."

"And why not?" Then there was a pause. "But I am a fool to ask such a question as that, and I should be worse than a fool were I to press it. It must then be considered as settled?"

She got up and clung to his arm. "Oh, Will, do not look at me like that!"

"It must then be considered as settled?" he repeated.

"Yes, Will, yes. Pray consider it as settled." He then sat down on the rock again, and she came and sat by him,—near to him, but not close as she had been before. She turned her eyes upon him, gazing on him, but did not speak to him; and he sat also without speaking for a while, with his eyes fixed upon the ground. "I suppose we may go back to the house?" he said at last.

"Give me your hand, Will, and tell me that you will still love me—as your sister."

He gave her his hand. "If you ever want a brother's care you shall have it from me," he said.

"But not a brother's love?"

"No. How can the two go together. I shan't cease to love you because my love is in vain. Instead of making me happy it will make me wretched. That will be the only difference."

"I would give my life to make you happy, if that were possible."

"You will not give me your life in the way that I would have it." After that they walked in silence back to the house, and when he had opened the front door for her, he parted from her and stood alone under the porch, thinking of his misfortune.

CHAPTER VI.

SAFE AGAINST LOVE-MAKING ONCE AGAIN.

For a considerable time Belton stood under the porch of the house, thinking of what had happened to him, and endeavouring to steady himself under the blow which he had received. I do not know that he had been sanguine of success. Probably he had made to himself no assurances on the subject. But he was a man to whom failure, of itself, was intolerable. In any other event of life he would have told himself that he would not fail—that he would persevere and conquer. He could imagine no other position as to which he could at once have been assured of failure, in any project on which he had set his heart. But as to this

project it was so. He had been told that she could not love him—that she could never love him;—and he had believed her. He had made his attempt and had failed; and, as he thought of this, standing under the porch, he became convinced that life for him was altogether changed, and that he who had been so happy must now be a wretched man.

He was still standing there when Mr. Amedroz came down into the hall, dressed for dinner, and saw his figure through the open doors. "Will," he said, coming up to him, "it only wants five minutes to dinner." Belton started and shook himself, as though he were shaking off a lethargy, and declared that he was quite ready. Then he remembered that he would be expected to dress, and rushed up-stairs, three steps at a time, to his own room. When he came down, Clara and her father were already in the dining-room, and he joined them there.

Mr. Amedroz, though he was not very quick in reading facts from the manners of those with whom he lived, had felt assured

that things had gone wrong between Belton and his daughter. He had not as yet had a minute in which to speak to Clara, but he was certain that it was so. Indeed, it was impossible not to read terrible disappointment and deep grief in the young man's manner. He made no attempt to conceal it, though he did not speak of it. Through the whole evening, though he was alone for a while with the squire, and alone also for a time with Clara, he never mentioned or alluded to the subject of his rejection. But he bore himself as though he knew and they knew—as though all the world knew that he had been rejected. And yet he did not remain silent. He talked of his property and of his plans, and explained how things were to be done in his absence. Once only was there something like an allusion made to his sorrow. "But you will be here at Christmas?" said Mr. Amedroz, in answer to something which Belton had said as to work to be done in his absence. "I do not know how that may be now," said Belton. And then they had all been silent.

It was a terrible evening to Clara. She endeavoured to talk, but found it to be impossible. All the brightness of the last few days had disappeared, and the world seemed to her to be more sad and solemn than ever. She had no idea when she was refusing him that he would have taken it to heart as he had done. The question had come before her for decision so suddenly, that she had not, in fact, had time to think of this as she was making her answer. All she had done was to feel that she could not be to him what he wished her to be. And even as yet she had hardly asked herself why she must be so steadfast in her refusal. But she had refused him steadfastly, and she did not for a moment think of reducing the earnestness of her resolution. It seemed to be manifest to her, from his present manner, that he would never ask the question again; but she was sure, let it be asked ever so often, that it could not be answered in any other way.

Mr. Amedroz not knowing why it was so, became cross and querulous, and scolded his

daughter. To Belton, also, he was captious, making little difficulties, and answering him with petulance. This the rejected lover took with most extreme patience, as though such a trifling annoyance had no effect in adding anything to his misery. He still held his purpose of going on the Saturday, and was still intent on work which was to be done before he went; but it seemed that he was satisfied to do everything now as a duty, and that the enjoyment of the thing, which had heretofore been so conspicuous, was over.

At last they separated, and Clara, as was her wont, went up to her father's room. "Papa," she said, "what is all this about Mr. Belton?"

"All what, my dear? what do you mean?"

"He has asked me to be,—to be his wife; and has told me that he came with your consent."

"And why shouldn't he have my consent? What is there amiss with him? Why shouldn't you marry him if he likes you? You seemed, I thought, to be very fond of him."

This surprised Clara more than anything.

She could hardly have told herself why, but she would have thought that such a proposition from her cousin would have made her father angry, — unreasonably angry; — angry with him for presuming to have such an idea; but now it seemed that he was going to be angry with her for not accepting her cousin out of hand.

"Yes, papa; I am fond of him; but not like that. I did not expect that he would think of me in that way."

"But why shouldn't he think of you? It would be a very good marriage for you, as far as money is concerned."

"You would not have me marry any one for that reason;—would you, papa?"

"But you seemed to like him. Well; of course I can't make you like him. I meant to do for the best; and when he came to me as he did, I thought he was behaving very handsomely, and very much like a gentleman."

"I am sure he would do that."

"And if I could have thought that this place would be your home when I am gone, it

would have made me very happy;—very happy."

She now came and stood close to him and took his hand. "I hope, papa, you do not make yourself uneasy about me. I shall do very well. I'm sure you can't want me to go away and leave you."

"How will you do very well? I'm sure I don't know. And if your aunt Winterfield means to provide for you, it would only be kind in her to let me know it, so that I might not have the anxiety always on my mind."

Clara knew well enough what was to be the disposition of her aunt's property, but she could not tell her father of that now. She almost felt that it was her duty to do so, but she could not bring herself to do it. She could only beg him not to be anxious on her behalf, making vague assurances that she would do very well. "And you are determined not to change your mind about Will?" he said at last.

"I shall not change my mind about that, papa, certainly," she answered. Then he

turned away from her, and she saw that he was displeased.

When alone, she was forced to ask herself why it was that she was so certain. Alas! there could in truth be no doubt on that subject in her own mind. When she sat down, resolved to give herself an answer, there was no doubt. She could not love her cousin, Will Belton, because her heart belonged to Captain Aylmer.

But she knew that she had received nothing in exchange for her heart. He had been kind to her on that journey to Taunton, when the agony arising from her brother's death had almost crushed her. He had often been kind to her on days before that,—so kind, so soft in his manners, approaching so nearly to the little tendernesses of incipient love-making, that the idea of regarding him as her lover had of necessity forced itself upon her. But in nothing had he gone beyond those tendernesses, which need not imperatively be made to mean anything, though they do often mean so much. It was now two years since she had

first thought that Captain Aylmer was the most perfect gentleman she knew, and nearly two years since Mrs. Winterfield had expressed to her a hope that Captain Aylmer might become her husband. She had replied that such a thing was impossible,—as any girl would have replied; and had in consequence treated Captain Aylmer with all the coolness which she had been able to assume whenever she was in company with him in her aunt's presence. Nor was it natural to her to be specially gracious to a man under such trying circumstances, even when no Mrs. Winterfield was there to behold. And so things had gone on. Captain Aylmer had now and again made himself very pleasant to her,—at certain trying periods of joy or trouble almost more than pleasant. But nothing had come of it, and Clara had told herself that Captain Aylmer had no special feeling in her favour. She had told herself this, ever since that journey together from Perivale to Taunton; but never till now had she also confessed to herself what was her own case.

She made a comparison between the two men. Her cousin Will was, she thought, the more generous, the more energetic,—perhaps, by nature, the man of the higher gifts. In person he was undoubtedly the superior. He was full of noble qualities;—forgetful of self, industrious, full of resources, a very man of men, able to command, eager in doing work for others' good and his own,—a man altogether uncontaminated by the coldness and selfishness of the outer world. But he was rough, awkward, but indifferently educated, and with few of those tastes which to Clara Amedroz were delightful. He could not read poetry to her, he could not tell her of what the world of literature was doing now or of what it had done in times past. He knew nothing of the inner world of worlds which governs the world. She doubted whether he could have told her who composed the existing cabinet, or have given the name of a single bishop beyond the see in which his own parish was situated. But Captain Aylmer knew everybody, and had read everything, and understood, as though by

instinct, all the movements of the world in which he lived.

But what mattered any such comparison? Even though she should be able to prove to herself beyond the shadow of a doubt that her cousin Will was of the two the fitter to be loved,—the one more worthy of her heart,—no such proof could alter her position. Love does not go by worth. She did not love her cousin as she must love any man to whom she could give her hand,—and, alas! she did love that other man.

On this night I doubt whether Belton did slumber with that solidity of repose which was usual to him. At any rate, before he came down in the morning he had found time for sufficient thought, and had brought himself to a resolution. He would not give up the battle as lost. To his thinking there was something weak and almost mean in abandoning any project which he had set before himself. He had been awkward, and he exaggerated to himself his own awkwardness. He had been hasty, and had gone about his task with inconsiderate

precipitancy. It might be that he had thus destroyed all his chance of success. But, as he said to himself, "he would never say die, as long as there was a puff of breath left to him." He would not mope, and hang down his head, and wear the willow. Such a state of things would ill suit either the roughness or the readiness of his life. No! He would bear like a man the disappointment which had on this occasion befallen him, and would return at Christmas and once more try his fortune.

At breakfast, therefore, the cloud had passed from his brow. When he came in he found Clara alone in the room, and he simply shook hands with her after his ordinary fashion. He said nothing of yesterday, and almost succeeded in looking as though yesterday had been in no wise memorable. She was not so much at her ease, but she also received some comfort from his demeanour. Mr. Amedroz came down almost immediately, and Belton soon took an opportunity of saying that he would be back at Christmas if Mr. Amedroz would receive him.

"Certainly," said the squire. "I thought it had been all settled."

"So it was;—till I said a word yesterday which foolishly seemed to unsettle it. But I have thought it over again, and I find that I can manage it."

"We shall be so glad to have you!" said Clara.

"And I shall be equally glad to come. They are already at work, sir, about the sheds."

"Yes; I saw the carts full of bricks go by," said the squire, querulously. "I didn't know there was to be any brickwork. You said you would have it made of deal slabs with oak posts."

"You must have a foundation, sir. I propose to carry the brickwork a foot and a half above the ground."

"I suppose you know best. Only that kind of thing is so very ugly."

"If you find it to be ugly after it is done, it shall be pulled down again."

"No;—it can never come down again."

"It can;—and it shall, if you don't like it. I never think anything of changes like that."

"I think they'll be very pretty!" said Clara.

"I dare say," said the squire; "but at any rate it won't make much difference to me. I shan't be here long to see them."

This was rather melancholy; but Belton bore up even against this, speaking cheery words and expressing bright hopes,—so that it seemed, both to Clara and to her father, that he had in a great measure overcome the disappointment of the preceding day. It was probable that he was a man not prone to be deeply sensitive in such matters for any long period. The period now had certainly not been long, and yet Will Belton was alive again.

Immediately after breakfast there occurred a little incident which was not without its effect upon them all. There came up on the drive, immediately before the front door, under the custody of a boy, a cow. It was an Alderney cow, and any man or woman at all understanding cows, would at once have perceived that this cow was perfect in her kind. Her eyes

were mild, and soft, and bright. Her legs were like the legs of a deer; and in her whole gait and demeanour she almost gave the lie to her own name, asserting herself to have sprung from some more noble origin among the woods, than may be supposed to be the origin of the ordinary domestic cow,—a useful animal, but heavy in its appearance, and seen with more pleasure at some little distance than at close quarters. But this cow was graceful in its movements, and almost tempted one to regard her as the far-off descendant of the elk or the antelope.

"What's that?" said Mr. Amedroz, who having no cows of his own, was not pleased to see one brought up in that way before his hall door. "There's somebody's cow come here."

Clara understood it in a moment; but she was pained, and said nothing. Had the cow come without any such scene as that of yesterday, she would have welcomed the animal with all cordiality, and would have sworn to her cousin that the cow should be cherished

for his sake. But after what had passed it was different. How was she to take any present from him now?

But Belton faced the difficulty without any bashfulness or apparent regret. "I told you I would give you a cow," said he, "and here she is."

"What can she want with a cow?" said Mr. Amedroz.

"I am sure she wants one very much. At any rate she won't refuse the present from me; will you, Clara?"

What could she say? "Not if papa will allow me to keep it."

"But we've no place to put it!" said the squire. "We haven't got grass for it!"

"There's plenty of grass," said Belton. "Come, Mr. Amedroz; I've made a point of getting this little creature for Clara, and you mustn't stand in the way of my gratification." Of course he was successful, and of course Clara thanked him with tears in her eyes.

The next two days passed by without anything special to mark them, and then the

cousin was to go. During the period of his visit he did not see Colonel Askerton, nor did he again see Mrs. Askerton. He went to the cottage once, with the special object of returning the Colonel's call; but the master was out, and he was not specially invited in to see the mistress. He said nothing more to Clara about her friends, but he thought of the matter more than once, as he was going about the place, and became aware that he would like to ascertain whether there was a mystery, and if so, what was its nature. He knew that he did not like Mrs. Askerton, and he felt also that Mrs. Askerton did not like him. This was, as he thought, unfortunate; for might it not be the case, that in the one matter which was to him of so much importance, Mrs. Askerton might have considerable influence over Clara.

During these days nothing special was said between him and Clara. The last evening passed over without anything to brighten it or to make it memorable. Mr. Amedroz, in his passive, but gently querulous way, was

sorry that Belton was going to leave him, as his cousin had been the creation of some new excitement for him, but he said nothing on the subject; and when the time for going to bed had come, he bade his guest farewell with some languid allusion to the pleasure which he would have in seeing him again at Christmas. Belton was to start very early in the morning, —before six, and of course he was prepared to take leave also of Clara. But she told him very gently, so gently that her father did not hear it, that she would be up to give him a cup of coffee before he went.

"Oh no," he said.

"But I shall. I won't have you go without seeing you out of the door."

And on the following morning she was up before him. She hardly understood, herself, why she was doing this. She knew that it should be her object to avoid any further special conversation on that subject which they had discussed up among the rocks. She knew that she could give him no comfort, and that he could give none to her. It would

seem that he was willing to let the remembrance of the scene pass away, so that it should be as though it had never been; and surely it was not for her to disturb so salutary an arrangement! But yet she was up to bid him God speed as he went. She could not bear,—so she excused the matter to herself,—she could not bear to think that he should regard her as ungrateful. She knew all that he had done for them. She had perceived that the taking of the land, the building of the sheds, the life which he had contrived in so short a time to throw into the old place, had all come from a desire on his part to do good to those in whose way he stood by family arrangements made almost before his birth; and she longed to say to him one word of thanks. And had he not told her,—once in the heat of his disappointment; for then at that moment, as Clara said to herself, she supposed that he must have been in some measure disappointed,—had he not even then told her that when she wanted a brother's care, a brother's care should be given to her by him?

Was she not therefore bound to do for him what she would do for a brother?

She, with her own hands, brought the coffee into the little breakfast parlour, and handed the cup into his hands. The gig, which had come overnight from Taunton, was not yet at the door, and there was a minute or two during which they must speak to each other. Who has not seen some such girl when she has come down early, without the full completeness of her morning toilet, and yet nicer, fresher, prettier to the eye of him who is so favoured, than she has ever been in more formal attire? And what man who has been so favoured has not loved her who has so favoured him, even though he may not previously have been enamoured as deeply as poor Will Belton?

"This is so good of you," he said.

"I wish I knew how to be good to you," she answered,—not meaning to trench upon dangerous ground, but feeling, as the words came from her, that she had done so. "You have been so good to us, so very good to papa, that we owe you everything. I am so grateful

to you for saying that you will come back at Christmas."

He had resolved that he would refrain from further love-making till the winter; but he found it very hard to refrain when so addressed. To take her in his arms, and kiss her twenty times, and swear that he would never let her go,—to claim her at once savagely as his own, that was the line of conduct to which temptation prompted him. How could she look at him so sweetly, how could she stand before him, ministering to him with all her pretty maidenly charms brought so close to him, without intending that he should love her? But he did refrain. "Blood is thicker than water," said he. "That's the real reason why I first came."

"I understand that quite, and it is that feeling that makes you so good. But I'm afraid you are spending a great deal of money here—and all for our sakes."

"Not at all. I shall get my money back again. And if I didn't, what then? I've plenty of money. It is not money that I want."

She could not ask him what it was that he did want, and she was obliged therefore to begin again. "Papa will look forward so to the winter now."

"And so shall I."

"But you must come for longer then;—you won't go away at the end of a week? Say that you won't."

"I'll see about it. I can't tell quite yet. You'll write me a line to say when the shed is finished, won't you?"

"That I will, and I'll tell you how Bessey goes on." Bessey was the cow. "I will be so very fond of her. She'll come to me for apples already."

Belton thought that he would go to her, wherever she might be, even if he were to get no apples. "It's all cupboard love with them," he said. "I'll tell you what I'll do;—when I come, I'll bring you a dog that will follow you without thinking of apples." Then the gig was heard on the gravel before the door, and Belton was forced to go. For a moment he reflected whether, as her cousin, it was not his

duty to kiss her. It was a matter as to which he had doubt,—as is the case with many male cousins; but ultimately he resolved that if he kissed her at all he would not kiss her in that light, and so he again refrained. "Good-bye," he said, putting out his great hand to her.

"Good-bye, Will, and God bless you." I almost think he might have kissed her, asking himself no questions as to the light in which it was done.

As he turned from her he saw the tears in her eyes; and as he sat in the gig, thinking of them, other tears came into his own. By heaven, he would have her yet! He was a man who had not read much of romance. To him all the imagined mysteries of passion had not been made common by the perusal of legions of love stories;—but still he knew enough of the game to be aware that women had been won in spite, as it were, of their own teeth. He knew that he could not now run away with her, taking her off by force; but still he might conquer her will by his own. As he remem-

bered the tears in her eyes, and the tone of her voice, and the pressure of her hand, and the gratitude that had become tender in its expression, he could not but think that he would be wise to love her still. Wise or foolish, he did love her still; and it should not be owing to fault of his if she did not become his wife. As he drove along he saw little of the Quantock Hills, little of the rich Somersetshire pastures, little of the early beauty of the August morning. He saw nothing but her eyes, moistened with bright tears, and before he reached Taunton he had rebuked himself with many revilings in that he had parted from her and not kissed her.

Clara stood at the door watching the gig till it was out of sight,—watching it as well as her tears would allow. What a grand cousin he was! Had it not been a pity,—a thousand pities,—that that grievous episode should have come to mar the brotherly love, the sisterly confidence, which might otherwise have been so perfect between them? But perhaps it might all be well yet. Clara knew, or thought

that she knew, that men and women differed in their appreciation of love. She, having once loved, could not change. Of that she was sure. Her love might be fortunate or unfortunate. It might be returned, or it might simply be her own, to destroy all hope of happiness for her on earth. But whether it were this or that, whether productive of good or evil, the love itself could not be changed. But with men she thought it might be different. Her cousin, doubtless, had been sincere in the full sincerity of his heart when he made his offer. And had she accepted it,—had she been able to accept it,—she believed that he would have loved her truly and constantly. Such was his nature. But she also believed that love with him, unrequited love, would have no enduring effect, and that he had already resolved, with equal courage and wisdom, to tread this short-lived passion out beneath his feet. One night had sufficed to him for that treading out. As she thought of this the tears ran plentifully down her cheek; and going again to her room she remained there crying till it was time for her

to wipe away the marks of her weeping, that she might go to her father.

But she was very glad that Will bore it so well;—very glad! Her cousin was safe against love-making once again.

CHAPTER VII.

MISS AMEDROZ GOES TO PERIVALE.

It had been settled for some time past that Miss Amedroz was to go to Perivale for a few days in November. Indeed it seemed to be a recognised fact in her life that she was to make the journey from Belton to Perivale and back very often, as there prevailed an idea that she owed a divided duty. This was in some degree hard upon her, as she had very little gratification in these visits to her aunt. Had there been any intention on the part of Mrs. Winterfield to provide for her, the thing would have been intelligible according to the usual arrangements which are made in the

world on such matters; but Mrs. Winterfield had scarcely a right to call upon her niece for dutiful attendance after having settled it with her own conscience that her property was all to go to her nephew. But Clara entertained no thought of rebelling, and had agreed to make the accustomed journey in November, travelling then, as she did all on such journeys, at her aunt's expense.

Two things only occurred to disturb her tranquillity before she went, and they were not of much violence. Mr. Wright, the clergyman, called at Belton Castle, and in the course of conversation with Mr. Amedroz renewed one of those ill-natured rumours which had before been spread about Mrs. Askerton. Clara did not see him, but she heard an account of it all from her father.

"Does it mean, papa," she said, speaking almost with anger, "that you want me to give up Mrs. Askerton?"

"How can you be so unkind as to ask me such a question?" he replied. "You know how I hate to be bothered. I tell you

what I hear, and then you can decide for yourself."

"But that isn't quite fair either, papa. That man comes here——"

"That man, as you call him, is the rector of the parish, and I've known him for forty years."

"And have never liked him, papa."

"I don't know much about liking anybody, my dear. Nobody likes me, and so why should I trouble myself?"

"But, papa, it all amounts to this—that somebody has said that the Askertons are not Askertons at all, but ought to be called something else. Now we know that he served as Captain and Major Askerton for seven years in India—and in fact it all means nothing. If I know anything, I know that he is Colonel Askerton."

"But do you know that she is his wife? That is what Mr. Wright asks. I don't say anything. I think it's very indelicate talking about such things."

"If I am asked whether I have seen her marriage certificate, certainly I have not; nor

probably did you ever do so as to any lady that you ever knew. But I know that she is her husband's wife, as we all of us know things of that sort. I know she was in India with him. I've seen things of hers marked with her name that she has had at least for ten years."

"I don't know anything about it, my dear," said Mr. Amedroz, angrily.

"But Mr. Wright ought to know something about it before he says such things. And then this that he's saying now isn't the same that he said before."

"I don't know what he said before."

"He said they were both of them using a feigned name."

"It's nothing to me what name they use. I know I wish they hadn't come here, if I'm to be troubled about them in this way—first by Wright and then by you."

"They have been very good tenants, papa."

"You needn't tell me that, Clara, and remind me about the shooting when you know how unhappy it makes me."

After this Clara said nothing more, and simply determined that Mr. Wright and his gossip should have no effect upon her intimacy with Mrs. Askerton. But not the less did she continue to remember what her cousin had said about Miss Vigo.

And she had been ruffled a second time by certain observations which Mrs. Askerton made to her respecting her cousin—or rather by little words which were dropped on various occasions. It was very clear that Mrs. Askerton did not like Mr. Belton, and that she wished to prejudice Clara against him. "It's a pity he shouldn't be a lover of yours," the lady said, "because it would be such a fine instance of Beauty and the Beast." It will of course be understood that Mrs. Askerton had never been told of the offer that had been made.

"You don't mean to say that he's not a handsome man," said Clara.

"I never observe whether a man is handsome or not; but I can see very well whether he knows what to do with his arms and legs, or whether he has the proper use of his voice

before ladies." Clara remembered a word or two spoken by her cousin to herself, in speaking which he had seemed to have a very proper use of his voice. "I know when a man is at ease like a gentleman, and when he is awkward like a——"

"Like a what?" said Clara. Finish what you've got to say."

"Like a ploughboy, I was going to say," said Mrs. Askerton.

"I declare I think you have a spite against him, because he said you were like some Miss Vigo," replied Clara, sharply. Mrs. Askerton was on that occasion silenced, and she said nothing more about Mr. Belton till after Clara had returned from Perivale.

The journey itself from Belton to Perivale was always a nuisance, and was more so now than usual, as it was made in the disagreeable month of November. There was kept at the little inn at Redicote an old fly—so called—which habitually made the journey to the Taunton railway-station, under the conduct of an old grey horse and an older and greyer

driver, whenever any of the old ladies of the neighbourhood were minded to leave their homes. This vehicle usually travelled at the rate of five miles an hour; but the old grey driver was never content to have time allowed to him for the transit calculated upon such a rate of speed. Accidents might happen, and why should he be made, as he would plaintively ask, to drive the poor beast out of its skin? He was consequently always at Belton a full hour before the time, and though Clara was well aware of all this, she could not help herself. Her father was fussy and impatient, the man was fussy and impatient; and there was nothing for her but to go. On the present occasion she was taken off in this way the full sixty minutes too soon, and after four dreary hours spent upon the road, found herself landed at the Taunton station, with a terrible gulf of time to be passed before she could again proceed on her journey.

One little accident had occurred to her. The old horse, while trotting leisurely along the level high road, had contrived to tumble

down. Clara did not think very much of this, as the same thing had happened with her before; but, even with an hour or more to spare, there arises a question whether under such circumstances the train can be saved. But the grey old man reassured her. "Now, miss," said he, coming to the window, while he left his horse recumbent and apparently comfortable on the road, "where'd you have been now, zure, if I hadn't a few minutes in hand for you." Then he walked off to some neigbouring cottage, and having obtained assistance, succeeded in putting his beast again upon his legs. After that he looked once more in at the window. "Who's right now, I wonder?" he said, with an air of triumph. And when he came to her for his guerdon at Taunton, he was evidently cross in not having it increased because of the accident.

That hour at the Taunton station was terrible to her. I know of no hours more terrible than those so passed. The minutes will not go away, and utterly fail in making good their claim to be called winged. A man walks

up and down the platform, and in that way obtains something of the advantage of exercise; but a woman finds herself bound to sit still within the dreary dulness of the waiting-room. There are, perhaps, people who under such circumstances can read, but they are few in number. The mind altogether declines to be active, whereas the body is seized by a spirit of restlessness to which delay and tranquillity are loathsome. The advertisements on the walls are examined, the map of some new Eden is studied—some Eden in which an irregular pond and a church are surrounded by a multiplicity of regular villas and shrubs—till the student feels that no consideration of health or economy would induce him to live there. Then the porters come in and out, till each porter has made himself odious to the sight. Everything is hideous, dirty, and disagreeable; and the mind wanders away, to consider why station-masters do not more frequently commit suicide. Clara Amedroz had already got beyond this stage, and was beginning to think of herself rather than of the

station-master, when at last there sounded, close to her ears, the bell of promise, and she knew that the train was at hand.

At Taunton there branched away from the main line that line which was to take her to Perivale, and therefore she was able to take her own place quietly in the carriage when she found that the down-train from London was at hand. This she did, and could then watch with equanimity, while the travellers from the other train went through the penance of changing their seats. But she had not been so watching for many seconds when she saw Captain Frederic Aylmer appear upon the platform. Immediately she sank back into her corner and watched no more. Of course he was going to Perivale; but why had not her aunt told her that she was to meet him? Of course she would be staying in the same house with him, and her present small attempt to avoid him would thus be futile. The attempt was made; but nevertheless she was probably pleased when she found that it was made in vain. He came at once to the

carriage in which she was sitting, and had packed his coats, and dressing-bag, and desk about the carriage before he had discovered who was his fellow-traveller. "How do you do, Captain Aylmer?" she said, as he was about to take his seat.

"Miss Amedroz! Dear me; how very odd! I had not the slightest expectation of meeting you here. The pleasure is of course the greater."

"Nor I of seeing you. Mrs. Winterfield has not mentioned to me that you were coming to Perivale."

"I didn't know it myself till the day before yesterday. I'm going to give an account of my stewardship to the good-natured Perivalians who send me to parliament. I'm to dine with the mayor to-morrow, and as some big-wig has come in his way who is going to dine with him also, the thing has been got up in a hurry. But I'm delighted to find that you are to be with us."

"I generally go to my aunt about this time of the year."

"It is very good-natured of you." Then he asked after her father, and she told him of Mr. Belton's visit, telling him nothing—as the reader will hardly require to be told—of Mr. Belton's offer. And so, by degrees, they fell into close and intimate conversation.

"I am so glad, for your father's sake!" said the captain, with sympathetic voice, speaking still of Mr. Belton's visit.

"That's what I feel, of course."

"It is just as it should be, as he stands in that position to the property. And so he is a nice sort of fellow, is he?"

"Nice is no word for him. He is perfect!"

"Dear me! This is terrible! You remember that they hated some old Greek patriot when they could find no fault in him?"

"I'll defy you to hate my cousin Will."

"What sort of looking man is he?"

"Extremely handsome;—at least I should say so."

"Then I certainly must hate him. And clever?"

"Well;—not what you would call clever. He is very clever about fields and cattle."

"Come, there is some relief in that."

"But you must not mistake me. He is clever; and then there's a way about him of doing everything just as he likes it, which is wonderful. You feel quite sure that he'll become master of everything."

"But I do not feel at all sure that I should like him the better for that!"

"But he doesn't meddle in things that he doesn't understand. And then he is so generous! His spending all that money down there is only done because he thinks it will make the place pleasanter to papa."

"Has he got plenty of money?"

"Oh, plenty! At least, I think so. He says that he has."

"The idea of any man owning that he had got plenty of money! What a happy mortal! And then to be handsome, and omnipotent, and to understand cattle and fields! One would strive to emulate him rather than envy him, had not one learned to acknowledge

that it is not given to every one to get to Corinth."

"You may laugh at him, but you'd like him if you knew him."

"One never can be sure of that from a lady's account of a man. When a man talks to me about another man, I can generally tell whether I should like him or not—particularly if I know the man well who is giving the description; but it is quite different when a woman is the describer."

"You mean that you won't take my word?"

"We see with different eyes in such matters. I have no doubt your cousin is a worthy man—and as prosperous a gentleman as the Thane of Cawdor in his prosperous days;—but probably if he and I came together we shouldn't have a word to say to each other."

Clara almost hated Captain Aylmer for speaking as he did, and yet she knew that it was true. Will Belton was not an educated man, and were they two to meet in her presence,

—the captain and the farmer,—she felt that she might have to blush for her cousin. But yet he was the better man of the two. She knew that he was the better man of the two, though she knew also that she could not love him as she loved the other.

Then they changed the subject of their conversation, and discussed Mrs. Winterfield, as they had often done before. Captain Aylmer had said that he should return to London on the Saturday, the present day being Tuesday, and Clara accused him of escaping always from the real hard work of his position. "I observe that you never stay a Sunday at Perivale," she said.

"Well;—not often. Why should I? Sunday is just the day that people like to be at home."

"I should have thought it would not have made much difference to a bachelor in that way."

"But Sunday is a day that one specially likes to pass after one's own fashion."

"Exactly;—and therefore you don't stay

with my aunt. I understand it all completely."

"Now you mean to be ill-natured!"

"I mean to say that I don't like Sundays at Perivale at all, and that I should do just as you do if I had the power. But women,—women, that is, of my age,—are such slaves! We are forced to give an obedience for which we can see no cause, and for which we can understand no necessity. I couldn't tell my aunt that I meant to go away on Saturday."

"You have no business which makes imperative calls upon your time."

"That means that I can't plead pretended excuses. But the true reason is that we are dependent."

"There is something in that, I suppose."

"Not that I am dependent on her. But my position generally is dependent, and I cannot assist myself."

Captain Aylmer found it difficult to make any answer to this, feeling the subject to be one which could hardly be discussed between him and Miss Amedroz. He not unnaturally

looked to be the heir of his aunt's property, and any provision made out of that property for Clara, would so far lessen that which would come to him. For anything that he knew, Mrs. Winterfield might leave everything she possessed to her niece. The old lady had not been open and candid to him whom she meant to favour in her will, as she had been to her to whom no such favour was to be shown. But Captain Aylmer did know, with tolerable accuracy, what was the state of affairs at Belton, and was aware that Miss Amedroz had no prospect of maintenance on which to depend, unless she could depend on her aunt. She was now pleading that she was not dependent on that lady, and Captain Aylmer felt that she was wrong. He was a man of the world, and was by no means inclined to abandon any right that was his own; but it seemed to him that he was almost bound to say some word to show that in his opinion Clara should hold herself bound to comply with her aunt's requirements.

"Dependence is a disagreeable word," he said; "and one never quite knows what it means."

"If you were a woman you'd know. It means that I must stay at Perivale on Sundays, while you can go up to London or down to Yorkshire. That's what it means."

"What you do mean, I think, is this;—that you owe a duty to your aunt, the performance of which is not altogether agreeable. Nevertheless it would be foolish in you to omit it."

"It isn't that;—not that at all. It would not be foolish, not in your sense of the word, but it would be wrong. My aunt has been kind to me, and therefore I am bound to her for this service. But she is kind to you also, and yet you are not bound. That's why I complain. You sail away under false pretences, and yet you think you do your duty. You have to see your lawyer,—which means going to your club; or to attend to your tenants,—which means hunting and shooting."

"I haven't got any tenants."

"You know very well that you could remain over Sunday without doing any harm to anybody;—only you don't like going to church three times, and you don't like hearing my

aunt read a sermon afterwards. Why shouldn't you stay, and I go to the club?"

"With all my heart, if you can manage it."

"But I can't; we ain't allowed to have clubs, or shooting, or to have our own way in anything, putting forward little pretences about lawyers."

"Come, I'll stay if you'll ask me."

"I'm sure I won't do that. In the first place you'd go to sleep, and then she would be offended; and I don't know that your sufferings would make mine any lighter. I'm not prepared to alter the ways of the world, but I feel myself entitled to grumble at them sometimes."

Mrs. Winterfield inhabited a large brick house in the centre of the town. It had a long frontage to the street; for there was not only the house itself, with its three square windows on each side of the door, and its seven windows over that, and again its seven windows in the upper story,—but the end of the coach-house also abutted on the street, on which was the family clock, quite as much respected in

Perivale as was the town-clock; and between the coach-house and the mansion there was the broad entrance into the yard, and the entrance also to the back door. No Perivalian ever presumed to doubt that Mrs. Winterfield's house was the most important house in the town. Nor did any stranger doubt it on looking at the frontage. But then it was in all respects a town house to the eye,—that is, an English town house, being as ugly and as respectable as unlimited bricks and mortar could make it. Immediately opposite to Mrs. Winterfield lived the leading doctor and a retired builder, so that the lady's eye was not hurt by any sign of a shop. The shops, indeed, came within a very few yards of her on either side; but as the neighbouring shops on each side were her own property, this was not unbearable. To me, had I lived there, the incipient growth of grass through some of the stones which formed the margin of the road would have been altogether unendurable. There is no sign of coming decay which is so melancholy to the eye as any which tells of a

decrease in the throng of men. Of men or horses there was never any throng now in that end of Perivale. That street had formed part of the main line of road from Salisbury to Taunton, and coaches, waggons, and posting-carriages had been frequent on it; but now, alas! it was deserted. Even the omnibuses from the railway-station never came there unless they were ordered to call at Mrs. Winterfield's door. For Mrs. Winterfield herself, this desolation had, I think, a certain melancholy attraction. It suited her tone of mind and her religious views that she should be thus daily reminded that things of this world were passing away and going to destruction. She liked to have ocular proof that grass was growing in the highways under mortal feet, and that it was no longer worth man's while to renew human flags in human streets. She was drawing near to the pavements which would ever be trodden by myriads of bright sandals, and which yet would never be worn, and would be carried to those jewelled causeways on which no weed could find a spot for its useless growth.

Behind the house there was a square prim garden, arranged in parallelograms, tree answering to tree at every corner, round which it was still her delight to creep when the weather permitted. Poor Clara! how much advice she had received during these creepings, and how often had she listened to inquiries as to the schooling of the gardener's children. Mrs. Winterfield was always unhappy about her gardener. Serious footmen are very plentiful, and even coachmen are to be found who, at a certain rate of extra payment, will be punctual at prayer time, and will promise to read good little books; but gardeners, as a class, are a profane people, who think themselves entitled to claim liberty of conscience, and who will not submit to the domestic despotism of a serious Sunday. They live in cottages by themselves, and choose to have an opinion of their own on church matters. Mrs. Winterfield was aware that she ought to bid high for such a gardener as she wanted. A man must be paid well who will submit to daily inquiries as to the spiritual welfare of himself, his wife, and

family. But even though she did bid high, and though she paid generously, no gardener would stop with her. One conscientious man attempted to bargain for freedom from religion during the six unimportant days of the week, being strong, and willing therefore to give up his day of rest; but such liberty could not be allowed to him, and he also went. "He couldn't stop," he said, "in justice to the greenhouses, when missus was so constant down upon him about his sprittual backsliding. And, after all, where did he backslide? It was only a pipe of tobacco with the babby in his arms, instead of that darned evening lecture."

Poor Mrs. Winterfield! She had been strong in her youth, and had herself sat through evening lectures with a fortitude which other people cannot attain. And she was strong too in her age, with the strength of a martyr, submitting herself with patience to wearinesses which are insupportable to those who have none of the martyr spirit. The sermons of Perivale were neither bright, nor eloquent, nor encouraging. All the old vicar or the young

curate could tell she had heard hundreds of times. She knew it all by heart, and could have preached their sermons to them better than they could preach them to her. It was impossible that she could learn anything from them; and yet she would sit there thrice a day, suffering from cold in winter, from cough in spring, from heat in summer, and from rheumatism in autumn; and now that her doctor had forbidden her to go more than twice, recommending her to go only once, she really thought that she regarded the prohibition as a grievance. Indeed, to such as her, that expectation of the jewelled causeway, and of the perfect pavement that shall never be worn, must be everything. But if she was right,—right as to herself and others,—then why has the world been made so pleasant? Why is the fruit of the earth so sweet; and the trees,—why are they so green; and the mountains so full of glory? Why are women so lovely? and why is it that the activity of man's mind is the only sure forerunner of man's progress? In listening thrice a day to outpourings from

the clergymen at Perivale there certainly was no activity of mind.

Now, in these days, Mrs. Winterfield was near to her reward. That she had ensured that I cannot doubt. She had fed the poor, and filled the young full with religious teachings,—perhaps not wisely, and in her own way only too well, but yet as her judgment had directed her. She had cared little for herself, —forgiving injuries done to her, and not forgiving those only which she thought were done to the Lord. She had lived her life somewhat as the martyr lived, who stood for years on his pillar unmoved, while his nails grew through his flesh. So had she stood, doing, I fear, but little positive good with her large means,—but thinking nothing of her own comfort here, in comparison with the comfort of herself and others in the world to which she was going.

On this occasion her nephew and niece reached her together; the prim boy, with the white cotton gloves and the low four-wheeled carriage, having been sent down to meet Clara. For Mrs. Winterfield was a lady who thought

it unbecoming that her niece,—though only an adopted niece,—should come to her door in an omnibus. Captain Aylmer had driven the four-wheeled carriage from the station, dispossessing the boy, and the luggage had been confided to the public conveyance.

"It is very fortunate that you should come together," said Mrs. Winterfield. "I didn't know when to expect you, Fred. Indeed, you never say at what hour you'll come."

"I think it safer to allow myself a little margin, aunt, because one has so many things to do."

"I suppose it is so with a gentleman," said Mrs. Winterfield. After which Clara looked at Captain Aylmer, but did not betray any of her suspicions. "But I knew Clara would come by this train," continued the old lady; "so I sent Tom to meet her. Ladies always can be punctual; they can do that at any rate." Mrs. Winterfield was one of those women who have always believed that their own sex is in every respect inferior to the other.

CHAPTER VIII.

CAPTAIN AYLMER MEETS HIS CONSTITUENTS.

On the first evening of their visit Captain Aylmer was very attentive to his aunt. He was quite alive to the propriety of such attentions, and to their expediency; and Clara was amused as she watched him while he sat by her side, by the hour together, answering little questions and making little remarks suited to the temperament of the old lady's mind. She, herself, was hardly called upon to join in the conversation on that evening, and as she sat and listened, she could not but think that Will Belton would have been less adroit, but that he would also have been more straightforward. And yet why should not Captain Aylmer talk

to his aunt? Will Belton would also have talked to his aunt if he had one, but then he would have talked his own talk, and not his aunt's talk. Clara could hardly make up her mind whether Captain Aylmer was or was not a sincere man. On the following day Aylmer was out all the morning, paying visits among his constituents, and at three o'clock he was to make his speech in the Town-hall. Special places in the gallery were to be kept for Mrs. Winterfield and her niece, and the old woman was quite resolved that she would be there. As the day advanced she became very fidgety, and at length she was quite alive to the perils of having to climb up the Town-hall stairs; but she persevered, and at ten minutes before three she was seated in her place.

"I suppose they will begin with prayer," she said to Clara. Clara, who knew nothing of the manner in which things were done at such meetings, said that she supposed so. A town councillor's wife who sat on the other side of Mrs. Winterfield, here took the liberty of explaining that as the Captain was going to

talk politics there would be no prayers. "But they have prayers in the Houses of Parliament," said Mrs. Winterfield, with much anger. To this the town councillor's wife, who was almost silenced by the great lady's wrath, said that indeed she did not know. After this Mrs. Winterfield continued to hope for the best, till the platform was filled and the proceedings had commenced. Then she declared the present men of Perivale to be a godless set, and expressed herself very sorry that her nephew had ever had anything to do with them. "No good can come of it, my dear," she said. Clara from the beginning had feared that no good would come of her aunt's visit to the Town-hall.

The business was put on foot at once, and with some little flourishing at the commencement, Captain Aylmer made his speech;—the same speech which we have all heard and read so often, specially adapted to the meridian of Perivale. He was a Conservative, and of course he told his hearers that a good time was coming; that he and his family were really

about to buckle themselves to the work, and that Perivale would hear things that would surprise it. The malt tax was to go, and the farmers were to have free trade in beer,—the arguments from the other side having come beautifully round in their appointed circle,—and old England was to be old England once again. He did the thing tolerably well, as such gentlemen usually do, and Perivale was contented with its member, with the exception of one Perivalian. To Mrs. Winterfield, sitting up there and listening with all her ears, it seemed that he had hitherto omitted all allusion to any subject that was worthy of mention. At last he said some word about the marriage and divorce court, condemning the iniquity of the present law, to which Perivale had opposed itself violently by petition and general meetings; and upon hearing this Mrs. Winterfield had thumped with her umbrella, and faintly cheered him with her weak old voice. But the surrounding Perivalians had heard the cheer, and it was repeated backwards and forwards through the room, till the

member's aunt thought that it might be her nephew's mission to annul that godless Act of Parliament, and restore the matrimonial bonds of England to their old rigidity. When Captain Aylmer came out to hand her up to her little carriage, she patted him, and thanked him, and encouraged him; and on her way home she congratulated herself to Clara that she should have such a nephew to leave behind her in her place.

Captain Aylmer was dining with the mayor on that evening, and Mrs. Winterfield was therefore able to indulge herself in talking about him. "I don't see much of young men, of course," she said; "but I do not even hear of any that are like him." Again Clara thought of her cousin Will. Will was not at all like Frederic Aylmer; but was he not better? And yet, as she thought thus, she remembered that she had refused her cousin Will because she loved that very Frederic Aylmer whom her mind was thus condemning.

"I'm sure he does his duty as a member of parliament very well," said Clara.

"That alone would not be much; but when that is joined to so much that is better, it is a great deal. I am told that very few of the men in the House now are believers at all."

"Oh, aunt!"

"It is terrible to think of my dear."

"But, aunt; they have to take some oath, or something of that sort, to show that they are Christians."

"Not now, my dear. They've done away with all that since we had Jew members. An atheist can go into parliament now; and I'm told that most of them are that, or nearly as bad. I can remember when no Papist could sit in parliament. But they seem to me to be doing away with everything. It's a great comfort to me that Frederic is what he is."

"I'm sure it must be, aunt."

Then there was a pause, during which, however, Mrs. Winterfield gave no sign that the conversation was to be considered as being over. Clara knew her aunt's ways so well, that she was sure something more was coming, and therefore waited patiently, without any

thought of taking up her book. "I was speaking to him about you yesterday," Mrs. Winterfield said at last.

"That would not interest him very much."

"Why not? Do you suppose he is not interested in those I love? Indeed, it did interest him; and he told me what I did not know before, and what you ought to have told me."

Clara now blushed, she knew not why, and became agitated. "I don't know that I have kept anything from you that I ought to have told," she said.

"He says that the provision made for you by your father has all been squandered."

"If he used that word he has been very unkind," said Clara, angrily.

"I don't know what word he used, but he was not unkind at all; he never is. I think he was very generous."

"I do not want his generosity, aunt."

"That is nonsense, my dear. If he has told me the truth, what have you to depend on?"

"I don't want to depend on anything. I hate hearing about it."

"Clara, I wonder you can talk in that way. If you were only seventeen it would be very foolish; but at your age it is inexcusable. When I am gone, and your father is gone, who is to provide for you? Will your cousin do it—Mr. Belton, who is to have the property?"

"Yes, he would—if I would let him;—of course I would not let him. But, aunt, pray do not go on. I would sooner have to starve than talk about it at all."

There was another pause; but Clara again knew that the conversation was not over; and she knew also that it would be vain for her to endeavour to begin another subject. Nor could she think of anything else to say, so much was she agitated.

"What makes you suppose that Mr. Belton would be so liberal?" asked Mrs. Winterfield.

"I don't know. I can't say. He is the nearest relation I shall have; and of all the

people I ever knew he is the best, and the most generous, and the least selfish. When he came to us papa was quite hostile to him—disliking his very name; but when the time came, papa could not bear to think of his going, because he had been so good."

"Clara!"

"Well, aunt."

"I hope you know my affection for you."

"Of course I do, aunt; and I hope you trust mine for you also."

"Is there anything between you and Mr. Belton besides cousinship?"

"Nothing."

"Because if I thought that, my trouble would of course be at an end."

"There is nothing;—but pray do not let me be a trouble to you." Clara, for a moment, almost resolved to tell her aunt the whole truth; but she remembered that she would be treating her cousin badly if she told the story of his rejection.

There was another short period of silence,

and then Mrs. Winterfield went on. "Frederic thinks that I should make some provision for you by will. That, of course, is the same as though he offered to do it himself. I told him that it would be so, and I read him my will last night. He said that that made no difference, and recommended me to add a codicil. I asked him how much I ought to give you, and he said fifteen hundred pounds. There will be as much as that after burying me without burden to the estate. You must acknowledge that he has been very generous."

But Clara, in her heart, did not at all thank Captain Aylmer for his generosity. She would have had everything from him, or nothing. It was grievous to her to think that she should owe to him a bare pittance to keep her out of the workhouse,—to him who had twice seemed to be on the point of asking her to share everything with him. She did not love her cousin Will as she loved him; but her cousin Will's assurance to her that he would treat her with a brother's care was sweeter to her by far than Frederic Aylmer's well-balanced counsel to his

aunt on her behalf. In her present mood, too, she wanted no one to have forethought for her; she desired no provision; for her, in the discomfiture of heart, there was consolation in the feeling that when she should find herself alone in the world, she would have been ill-treated by her friends all round her. There was a charm in the prospect of her desolation of which she did not wish to be robbed by the assurance of some seventy pounds a year, to be given to her by Captain Frederic Aylmer. To be robbed of one's grievance is the last and foulest wrong,—a wrong under which the most enduring temper will at last yield and become soured,—by which the strongest back will be broken. "Well, my dear," continued Mrs. Winterfield, when Clara made no response to this appeal for praise.

"It is so hard for me to say anything about it, aunt. What can I say but that I don't want to be a burden to any one?"

"That is a position which very few women can attain,—that is, very few single women."

"I think it would be well if all single

women were strangled by the time they are thirty," said Clara with a fierce energy which absolutely frightened her aunt.

"Clara! how can you say anything so wicked,—so abominably wicked."

"Anything would be better than being twitted in this way. How can I help it that I am not a man and able to work for my bread? But I am not above being a housemaid, and so Captain Aylmer shall find. I'd sooner be a housemaid, with nothing but my wages, than take the money which you say he is to give me. It will be of no use, aunt, for I shall not take it."

"It is I that am to leave it to you. It is not to be a present from Frederic."

"It is the same thing, aunt. He says you are to do it; and you told me just now that it was to come out of his pocket."

"I should have done it myself long ago, had you told me all the truth about your father's affairs."

"How was I to tell you? I would sooner have bitten my tongue out. But I will tell

you the truth now. If I had known that all this was to be said to me about money, and that our poverty was to be talked over between you and Captain Aylmer, I would not have come to Perivale. I would rather that you should be angry with me and think that I had forgotten you."

"You would not say that, Clara, if you remembered that this will probably be your last visit to me."

"No, no; it will not be the last. But do not talk about these things. And it will be so much better that I should be here when he is not here."

"I had hoped that when I died you might both be with me together,—as husband and wife."

"Such hopes never come to anything."

"I still think that he would wish it."

"That is nonsense, aunt It is indeed, for neither of us wish it." A lie on such a subject from a woman under such circumstances is hardly to be considered a lie at all. It is spoken with no mean object, and is the only

bulwark which the woman has ready at her need to cover her own weakness.

"From what he said yesterday," continued Mrs. Winterfield, "I think it is your own fault."

"Pray,—pray do not talk in that way. It cannot be matter of any fault that two people do not want to marry each other."

"Of course I asked him no positive question. It would be indelicate even in me to have done that. But he spoke as though he thought very highly of you."

"No doubt he does. And so do I of Mr. Possitt."

"Mr. Possitt is a very excellent young man," said Mrs. Winterfield, gravely. Mr. Possitt was, indeed, her favourite curate at Perivale, and always dined at the house on Sundays between services, when Mrs. Winterfield was very particular in seeing that he took two glasses of her best port wine to support him. "But Mr. Possitt has nothing but his curacy."

"There is no danger, aunt, I can assure you."

"I don't know what you call danger; but Frederic seemed to think that you are always sharp with him. You don't want to quarrel with him, I hope, because I love him better than any one in the world?"

"Oh, aunt, what cruel things you say to me without thinking of them!"

"I do not mean to be cruel, but I will say nothing more about him. As I told you before, that I had not thought it expedient to leave away any portion of my little property from Frederic,—believing as I did then, that the money intended for you by your father was still remaining,—it is best that you should now know that I have at last learnt the truth, and that I will at once see my lawyer about making this change."

"Dear aunt, of course I thank you."

"I want no thanks, Clara. I humbly strive to do what I believe to be my duty. I have never felt myself to be more than a steward of my money. That I have often failed in my stewardship I know well;—for in what duties do we not all fail?" Then she gently laid her-

self back in her arm-chair, closing her eyes, while she kept fast clasped in her hands the little book of daily devotion which she had been striving to read when the conversation had been commenced. Clara knew then that nothing more was to be said, and that she was not at present to interrupt her aunt. From her posture, and the closing of her eyelids, Mrs. Winterfield might have been judged to be asleep; but Clara could see the gentle motion of her lips, and was aware that her aunt was solacing herself with prayer.

Clara was angry with herself, and angry with all the world. She knew that the old lady who was sitting then before her was very good; and that all this that had now been said had come from pure goodness, and a desire that strict duty might be done; and Clara was angry with herself in that she had not been more ready with her thanks, and more demonstrative with her love and gratitude. Mrs. Winterfield was affectionate as well as good, and her niece's coldness, as the niece well knew, had hurt her sorely. But still what could Clara

have done or said? She told herself that it was beyond her power to burst out into loud praises of Captain Aylmer; and of such nature was the gratitude which Mrs. Winterfield had desired. She was not grateful to Captain Aylmer, and wanted nothing that was to come from his generosity. And then her mind went away to that other portion of her aunt's discourse. Could it be possible that this man was in truth attached to her, and was repelled simply by her own manner? She was aware that she had fallen into a habit of fighting with him, of sparring against him with words about indifferent things, and calling his conduct in question in a manner half playful and half serious. Could it be the truth that she was thus robbing herself of that which would be to her,—as to herself she had frankly declared,—the one treasure which she would desire? Twice, as has been said before, words had seemed to tremble on his lips which might have settled the question for her for ever; and on both occasions, as she knew, she herself had helped to laugh off the precious word that had

been coming. But had he been thoroughly in earnest,—in earnest as she would have him to be,—no laugh would have deterred him from his purpose. Could she have laughed Will Belton out of his declaration?

At last the lips ceased to move, and she knew that her aunt was in truth asleep. The poor old lady hardly ever slept at night; but nature, claiming something of its due, would give her rest such as this in her arm-chair by the fire-side. They were sitting in a large double drawing-room upstairs, in which there were, as was customary with Mrs. Winterfield in winter, two fires; and the candles were in the back-room, while the two ladies sat in that looking out into the street. This Mrs. Winterfield did to save her eyes from the candles, and yet to be within reach of light if it were wanted. And Clara also sat motionless in the dark, careful not to disturb her aunt, and desirous of being with her when she should awake. Captain Aylmer had declared his purpose of being home early from the Mayor's dinner, and the ladies were to wait for his arrival before

tea was brought to them. Clara was herself almost asleep when the door was opened, and Captain Aylmer entered the room.

"H—sh!" she said, rising gently from her chair, and putting up her finger. He saw her by the dull light of the fire, and closed the door without a sound. Clara then crept into the back-room, and he followed her with noiseless step. "She did not sleep at all last night," said Clara; "and now the unusual excitement of the day has fatigued her, and I think it is better not to wake her." The rooms were large, and they were able to place themselves at such a distance from the sleeper that their low words could hardly disturb her.

"Was she very tired when she got home?" he asked.

"Not very. She has been talking much since that."

"Has she spoken about her will to you?"

"Yes;—she has."

"I thought she would." Then he was silent, as though he expected that she would

speak again on that matter. But she had no wish to discuss her aunt's will with him, and therefore, to break the silence, asked him some trifling question. "Are you not home earlier than you expected?"

"It was very dull, and there was nothing more to be said. I did come away early, and perhaps have given affront. I hope you will accept the compliment implied."

"Your aunt will, when she wakes. She will be delighted to find you here."

"I am awake," said Mrs. Winterfield. "I heard Frederic come in. It is very good of him to come so soon. Clara, my dear, we will have tea."

During tea, Captain Aylmer was called upon to give an account of the Mayor's feast,—how the rector had said grace before dinner, and Mr. Possitt had done so after dinner, and how the soup had been uneatable. "Dear me!" said Mrs. Winterfield. "And yet his wife was housekeeper formerly in a family that lived very well!" The Mrs. Winterfields of this world allow themselves little spiteful pleasures

of this kind, repenting of them, no doubt, in those frequent moments in which they talk to their friends of their own terrible vilenesses. Captain Aylmer then explained that his own health had been drunk, and his aunt desired to know whether, in returning thanks, he had been able to say anything further against that wicked Divorce Act of Parliament. This her nephew was constrained to answer with a negative, and so the conversation was carried on till tea was over. She was very anxious to hear every word that he could be made to utter as to his own doings in Parliament, and as to his doings in Perivale, and hung upon him with that wondrous affection which old people with warm hearts feel for those whom they have selected as their favourites. Clara saw it all, and knew that her aunt was almost doting.

"I think I'll go up to bed now, my dears," said Mrs. Winterfield, when she had taken her cup of tea. "I am tired with those weary stairs in the Town-hall, and I shall be better in my own room." Clara offered to go with

her, but this attendance her aunt declined,—as she did always. So the bell was rung, and the old maid-servant walked off with her mistress, and Miss Amedroz and Captain Aylmer were left together.

"I don't think she will last long," said Captain Aylmer, soon after the door was closed.

"I should be sorry to believe that; but she is certainly much altered."

"She has great courage to keep her up,—and a feeling that she should not give way, but do her duty to the last. In spite of all that, however, I can see how changed she is since the summer. Have you ever thought how sad it will be if she should be alone when the day comes?"

"She has Martha, who is more to her now than any one else,—unless it is you."

"You could not remain with her over Christmas, I suppose?"

"Who, I? What would my father do? Papa is as old, or nearly as old, as my aunt."

"But he is strong."

"He is very lonely. He would be more lonely than she is, for he has no such servant as Martha to be with him. Women can do better than men, I think, when they come to my aunt's age."

From this they got into a conversation as to the character of the lady with whom they were both so nearly connected, and, in spite of all that Clara could do to prevent it, continual references were made by Captain Aylmer to her money and her will, and the need of an addition to that will on Clara's behalf. At last she was driven to speak out. "Captain Aylmer," she said, "the subject is so distasteful to me, that I must ask you not to speak about it."

"In my position I am driven to think about it."

"I cannot, of course, help your thoughts; but I can assure you that they are unnecessary."

"It seems to me so hard that there should be such a gulf between you and me." This he said after he had been silent for a while;

and as he spoke he looked away from her at the fire.

"I don't know that there is any particular gulf," she replied.

"Yes, there is. And it is you that make it. Whenever I attempt to speak to you as a friend you draw yourself off from me, and shut yourself up. I know that it is not jealousy."

"Jealousy, Captain Aylmer!"

"Jealousy with my aunt, I mean."

"No, indeed."

"You are infinitely too proud for that; but I am sure that a stranger seeing it all would think that it was so."

"I don't know what it is that I do or that I ought not to do. But all my life everything that I have done at Perivale has always been wrong."

"It would have been so natural that you and I should be friends."

"If we are enemies, Captain Aylmer, I don't know it."

"But if ever I venture to speak of your

future life you always repel me;—as though you were determined to let me know that it should not be a matter of care to me."

"That is exactly what I am determined to let you know. You are, or will be, a rich man, and you have everything the world can give you. I am, or shall be, a very poor woman."

"Is that a reason why I should not be interested in your welfare?"

"Yes;—the best reason in the world. We are not related to each other, though we have a common connection in dear Mrs. Winterfield. And nothing, to my idea, can be more objectionable than any sort of dependence from a woman of my age on a man of yours,—there being no real tie of blood between them. I have spoken very plainly, Captain Aylmer, for you have made me do it."

"Very plainly," he said.

"If I have said anything to offend you, I beg your pardon; but I was driven to explain myself." Then she got up and took her bed-candle in her hand.

"You have not offended me," he said, as he also rose.

"Good night, Captain Aylmer."

He took her hand and kept it. "Say that we are friends."

"Why should we not be friends?"

"There is no reason on my part why we should not be the dearest friends," he said. "Were it not that I am so utterly without encouragement, I should say the very dearest." He still held her hand, and was looking into her face as he spoke. For a moment she stood there, bearing his gaze, as though she expected some further words to be spoken. Then she withdrew her hand, and again saying, in a clear voice, "Good night, Captain Aylmer," she left the room.

CHAPTER IX.

CAPTAIN AYLMER'S PROMISE TO HIS AUNT.

What had Captain Aylmer meant by telling her that they might be the dearest friends—by saying so much as that, and then saying no more? Of course Clara asked herself that question as soon as she was alone in her bedroom, after leaving Captain Aylmer below. And she made two answers to herself—two answers which were altogether distinct and contradictory one of the other. At first she decided that he had said so much and no more because he was deceitful—because it suited his vanity to raise hopes which he had no intention of fulfilling—because he was fond of

saying soft things which were intended to have no meaning. This was her first answer to herself. But in her second she accused herself as much as she had before accused him. She had been cold to him, unfriendly, and harsh. As her aunt had told her, she spoke sharp words to him, and repulsed the kindness which he offered her. What right had she to expect from him a declaration of love when she was studious to stop him at every avenue by which he might approach it? A little management on her side would, she almost knew, make things right. But then the idea of any such management distressed her;—nay, more, disgusted her. The management, if any were necessary, must come from him. And it was manifest enough that if he had any strong wishes in this matter he was not a good manager. Her cousin, Will Belton, knew how to manage much better.

On the next morning, however, all her thoughts respecting Captain Aylmer were dissipated by tidings which Martha brought to her bedside. Her aunt was ill. Martha was

afraid that her mistress was very ill. She did not dare to send specially for the doctor on her own responsibility, as Mrs. Winterfield had strong and peculiar feelings about doctors' visits, and had on this very morning declined to be so visited. On the next day the doctor would come in the usual course of things, for she had submitted for some years back to such periodical visitings; but she had desired that nothing might be done out of the common way. Martha, however, declared that if she were alone with her mistress the doctor would be sent for; and she now petitioned for aid from Clara. Clara was, of course, by her aunt's bedside in a few minutes, and in a few minutes more the doctor from the other side of the way was there also.

It was ten o'clock before Captain Aylmer and Miss Amedroz met at breakfast, and they had before that been together in Mrs. Winterfield's room. The doctor had told Captain Aylmer that his aunt was very ill—very ill, dangerously ill. She had been wrong to go into such a place as the cold, unaired Town-

hall, and that, too, in the month of November; and the fatigue had also been too much for her. Mrs. Winterfield, too, had admitted to Clara that she knew herself to be very ill. "I felt it coming on me last night," she said, "when I was talking to you; and I felt it still more strongly when I left you after tea. I have lived long enough. God's will be done." At that moment, when she said she had lived long enough, she forgot her intention with reference to her will. But she remembered it before Clara had left the room. "Tell Frederic," she said, "to send at once for Mr. Palmer." Now Clara knew that Mr. Palmer was the attorney, and resolved that she would give no such message to Captain Aylmer. But Mrs. Winterfield sent for her nephew, who had just left her, and herself gave her orders to him. In the course of the morning there came tidings from the attorney's office that Mr. Palmer was away from Perivale, that he would be back on the morrow, and that he would of course wait on Mrs. Winterfield immediately on his return.

Captain Aylmer and Miss Amedroz discussed nothing but their aunt's state of health that morning over the breakfast-table. Of course, under such circumstances in the house, there was no further immediate reference made to that offer of dearest friendship. It was clear to them both that the doctor did not expect that Mrs. Winterfield would again leave her bed; and it was clear to Clara also that her aunt was of the same opinion.

"I shall hardly be able to go home now," she said.

"It will be kind of you if you can remain."

"And you?"

"I shall remain over the Sunday. If by that time she is at all better, I will run up to town and come down again before the end of the week. I know you don't believe it, but a man really has some things which he must do."

"I don't disbelieve you, Captain Aylmer."

"But you must write to me daily if I do go."

To this Clara made no objection;—and she

must write also to some one else. She must let her cousin know how little chance there was that she would be at home at Christmas, explaining to him at the same time that his visit to her father would on that account be all the more welcome.

"Are you going to her now?" he asked, as Clara got up immediately after breakfast. "I shall be in the house all the morning, and if you want me you will of course send for me."

"She may perhaps like to see you."

"I will come up every now and again. I would remain there altogether, only I should be in the way." Then he got a newspaper and made himself comfortable over the fire, while she went up to her weary task in her aunt's room.

Neither on that day nor on the next did the lawyer come, and on the following morning all earthly troubles were over with Mrs. Winterfield. It was early on the Sunday morning that she died, and late on the Saturday evening Mr. Palmer had sent up to say that he had been detained at Taunton, but that

he would wait on Mrs. Winterfield early on the Monday morning. On the Friday the poor lady had said much on the subject, but had been comforted by an assurance from her nephew that the arrangement should be carried out exactly as she wished it, whether the codicil was or was not added to the will. To Clara she said nothing more on the subject, nor at such a time did Captain Aylmer feel that he could offer her any assurance on the matter. But Clara knew that the will was not altered; and though at the time she was not thinking much about money, she had, nevertheless, very clearly made up her own mind as to her own conduct. Nothing should induce her to take a present of fifteen hundred pounds,—or, indeed, of as many pence from Captain Aylmer. During those hours of sickness in the house they had been much thrown together, and no one could have been kinder or more gentle to her than he had been. He had come to call her Clara, as people will do when joined together in such duties, and had been very pleasant as well as affectionate in his manner with

her. It had seemed to her that he also wished to take upon himself the cares and love of an adopted brother. But as an adopted brother she would have nothing to do with him. The two men whom she liked best in the world would assume each the wrong place; and between them both she felt that she would be left friendless.

On the Saturday afternoon they had both surmised how it was going to be with Mrs. Winterfield, and Captain Aylmer had told Mr. Palmer that he feared his coming on the Monday would be useless. He explained also what was required, and declared that he would be at once ready to make good the deficiency in the will. Mr. Palmer seemed to think that this would be better even than the making of a codicil in the last moments of the lady's life; and, therefore, he and Captain Aylmer were at rest on that subject.

During the greater part of the Saturday night both Clara and Captain Aylmer remained with their aunt; and once when the morning was almost there, and the last hour was near at

hand, she had said a word or two which both of them had understood, in which she implored her darling Frederic to take a brother's care of Clara Amedroz. Even in that moment Clara had repudiated the legacy, feeling sure in her heart that Frederic Aylmer was aware what was the nature of the care which he ought to owe, if he would consent to owe any care to her. He promised his aunt that he would do as she desired him, and it was impossible that Clara should then, aloud, repudiate the compact. But she said nothing, merely allowing her hand to rest with his beneath the thin, dry hand of the dying woman. To her aunt, however, when for a moment they were alone together, she showed all possible affection, with thanks and tears, and warm kisses, and prayers for forgiveness as to all those matters in which she had offended. "My pretty one; —my dear," said the old woman, raising her hand on to the head of the crouching girl, who was hiding her moist eyes on the bed. Never during her life had her aunt appeared to her in so loving a mood as now, when she was leaving

it. Then, with some eager impassioned words, in which she pronounced her ideas of what should be the religious duties of a woman, Mrs. Winterfield bade farewell to her niece. After that, she had a longer interview with her nephew, and then it seemed that all worldly cares were over with her.

The Sunday was passed in all that blankness of funeral grief which is absolutely necessary on such occasions. It cannot be said that either Clara or Captain Aylmer were stricken with any of that agony of woe which is produced on us by the death of those whom we have loved so well that we cannot bring ourselves to submit to part with them. They were both truly sorry for their aunt, in the common parlance of the world; but their sorrow was of that modified sort which does not numb the heart, and make the surviving sufferer feel that there never can be a remedy. Nevertheless, it demanded sad countenances, few words, and those spoken hardly above a whisper; an absence of all amusement and almost of all employment, and a full surrender to the trappings of woe

They two were living together without other companion in the big house,—sitting down together to dinner and to tea; but on this day hardly a dozen words were spoken between them, and those dozen were spoken with no purport. On the Monday Captain Aylmer gave orders for the funeral, and then went away to London, undertaking to be back on the day before the last ceremony. Clara was rather glad that he should be gone, though she feared the solitude of the big house. She was glad that he should be gone, as she found it impossible to talk to him with ease to herself. She knew that he was about to assume some position as protector or quasi guardian over her, in conformity with her aunt's express wish, and she was quite resolved that she would submit to no such guardianship from his hands. That being so, the shorter period there might be for any such discussion the better.

The funeral was to take place on the Saturday, and during the four days that intervened she received two visits from Mr. Possitt. Mr. Possitt was very discreet in what he said, and Clara

was angry with herself for not allowing his words to have any avail with her. She told herself that they were commonplace; but she told herself, also, after his first visit, that she had no right to expect anything else but commonplace words. How often are men found who can speak words on such occasions that are not commonplaces,—that really stir the soul, and bring true comfort to the listener? The humble listener may receive comfort even from commonplace words; but Clara was not humble, and rebuked herself for her own pride. On the second occasion of his coming she did endeavour to receive him with a meek heart, and to accept what he said with an obedient spirit. But the struggle within her bosom was hard, and when he bade her to kneel and pray with him, she doubted for a moment between rebellion and hypocrisy. But she had determined to be meek, and so hypocrisy carried the hour.

What would a clergyman say on such an occasion if the object of his solicitude were to decline the offer, remarking that prayer at that

moment did not seem to be opportune; and that, moreover, he, the person thus invited, would like, first of all, to know what was to be the special object of the proposed prayer, if he found that he could, at the spur of the moment, bring himself at all into a fitting mood for the task? Of him who would decline, without argument, the clergyman would opine that he was simply a reprobate. Of him who would propose to accompany an hypothetical acceptance with certain stipulations, he would say to himself that he was a stiff-necked wrestler against grace, whose condition was worse than that of the reprobate. Men and women, conscious that they will be thus judged, submit to the hypocrisy, and go down upon their knees unprepared, making no effort, doing nothing while they are there, allowing their consciences to be eased if they can only feel themselves numbed into some ceremonial awe by the occasion. So it was with Clara, when Mr. Possitt, with easy piety, went through the formula of his devotion, hardly ever having realised to himself the fact that, of all works in which

man can engage himself, that of prayer is the most difficult.

"It is a sad loss to me," said Mr. Possitt, as he sat for half an hour with Clara, after she had thus submitted herself. Mr. Possitt was a weakly, pale-faced little man, who worked so hard in the parish that on every day, Sundays included, he went to bed as tired in all his bones as a day labourer from the fields;—"a very great loss. There are not many now who understand what a clergyman has to go through, as our dear friend did." If he was mindful of his two glasses of port wine on Sundays, who could blame him?

"She was a very kind woman, Mr. Possitt."

"Yes, indeed;—and so thoughtful! That she will have an exceeding great reward, who can doubt? Since I knew her she always lived as a saint upon earth. I suppose there's nothing known as to who will live in this house, Miss Amedroz?"

"Nothing;—I should think."

"Captain Aylmer won't keep it in his own hands?"

"I cannot tell in the least; but as he is obliged to live in London because of Parliament, and goes to Yorkshire always in the autumn, he can hardly want it."

"I suppose not. But it will be a sad loss, —a sad loss to have this house empty. Ah; —I shall never forget her kindness to me. Do you know, Miss Amedroz,"—and as he told his little secret he became beautifully confidential;—"do you know, she always used to send me ten guineas at Christmas to help me along. She understood, as well as any one, how hard it is for a gentleman to live on seventy pounds a year. You will not wonder that I should feel that I've had a loss." It is hard for a gentleman to live upon seventy pounds a year; and it is very hard, too, for a lady to live upon nothing a year, which lot in life fate seemed to have in store for Miss Amedroz.

On the Friday evening Captain Aylmer came back, and Clara was in truth glad to see him. Her aunt's death had been now far enough back to admit of her telling Martha that she

would not dine till Captain Aylmer had come, and to allow her to think somewhat of his comfort. People must eat and drink even when the grim monarch is in the house; and it is a relief when they first dare to do so with some attention to the comforts which are ordinarily so important to them. For themselves alone women seldom care to exercise much trouble in this direction; but the presence of a man at once excuses and renders necessary the ceremony of a dinner. So Clara prepared for the arrival, and greeted the comer with some returning pleasantness of manner. And he, too, was pleasant with her, telling her of his plans, and speaking to her as though she were one of those whom it was natural that he should endeavour to interest in his future welfare.

"When I come back to-morrow," he said, "the will must be opened and read. It had better be done here." They were sitting over the fire in the dining-room, after dinner, and Clara knew that the coming back to which he alluded was his return from the funeral. But

she made no answer to this, as she wished to say nothing about her aunt's will. "And after that," he continued, "you had better let me take you out."

"I am very well," she said. "I do not want any special taking out."

"But you have been confined to the house the whole week."

"Women are accustomed to that, and do not feel it as you would. However, I will walk with you if you'll take me."

"Of course I'll take you. And then we must settle our future plans. Have you fixed upon any day yet for returning? Of course, the longer you stay, the kinder you will be."

"I can do no good to any one by staying."

"You do good to me;—but I suppose I'm nobody. I wish I could tell what to do about this house. Dear, good old woman! I know she would have wished that I should keep it in my own hands, with some idea of living here at some future time;—but of course I never shall live here."

"Why not?"

"Would you like it yourself?"

"I am not Member of Parliament for Perivale, and should not be the leading person in the town. You would be a sort of king here; and then, some day, you will have your mother's property as well as your aunt's; and you would be near to your own tenants."

"But that does not answer my question. Could you bring yourself to live here,—even if it were your own?"

"Why not?"

"Because it is so deadly dull;—because it has no attraction whatever;—because of all lives it is the one you would like the least. No one should live in a provincial town but they who make their money by doing so."

"And what are the wives and daughters of such people to do,—and especially their widows? I have no doubt I could live here very happily if I had anybody near me that I liked. I should not wish to have to depend altogether on Mr. Possitt for society."

"And you would find him about the best."

"Mr. Possitt has been with me twice whilst you were away, and he, too, asked what you meant to do about the house."

"And what did you say?"

"What could I say? Of course I said I did not know. I suppose he was meditating whether you would live here and ask him to dinner on Sundays!"

"Mr. Possitt is a very good sort of man," said the Captain, gravely;—for Captain Aylmer, in the carrying out of his principles, always spoke seriously of everything connected with the Church in Perivale.

"And quite worthy to be asked to dinner on Sundays," said Clara. "But I did not give him any hope. How could I? Of course I knew that you would not live here, though I did not tell him so."

"No; I don't suppose I shall. But I see very plainly that you think I ought to do so."

"I've the old-fashioned idea as to a man's living near to his own property; that is all. No doubt it was good for other people in Perivale, besides Mr. Possitt, that my dear aunt

lived here; and if the house is shut up, or let to some stranger, they will feel her loss the more. But I don't know that you are bound to sacrifice yourself to them."

"If I were to marry," said Captain Aylmer, very slowly and in a low voice, "of course I should have to think of my wife's wishes."

"But if your wife, when she accepted you, knew that you were living here, she would hardly take upon herself to demand that you should give up your residence."

"She might find it very dull."

"She would make her own calculations as to that before she accepted you."

"No doubt;—but I can't fancy any woman taking a man who was tied by his leg to Perivale. What do the people do who live in Perivale?"

"Earn their bread."

"Yes;—that's just what I said. But I shouldn't earn mine here."

"I have the feeling I spoke of very strongly about papa's place," said Clara, changing the conversation suddenly. "I very often think

of the future fate of Belton Castle when papa shall have gone. My cousin has got his house at Plaistow, and I don't suppose he'd live there."

"And where will you go?" he asked.

As soon as she had spoken, Clara regretted her own imprudence in having ventured to speak upon her own affairs. She had been well pleased to hear him talk of his plans, and had been quite resolved not to talk of her own. But now, by her own speech, she had set him to make inquiries as to her future life. She did not at first answer the question; but he repeated it. "And where will you live yourself?"

"I hope I may not have to think of that for some time to come yet."

"It is impossible to help thinking of such things."

"I can assure you that I haven't thought about it; but I suppose I shall endeavour to—to—; I don't know what I shall endeavour to do."

"Will you come and live at Perivale?"

"Why here more than anywhere else?"

"In this house I mean."

"That would suit me admirably;—would it not? I'm afraid Mr. Possitt would not find me a good neighbour. To tell the truth, I think that any lady who lives here alone ought to be older than I am. The Perivalians would not show to a young woman that sort of respect which they have always felt for this house."

"I didn't mean alone," said Captain Aylmer.

Then Clara got up and made some excuse for leaving him, and there was nothing more said between them,—nothing, at least, of moment, on that evening. She had become uneasy when he asked her whether she would like to live in his house at Perivale. But afterwards, when he suggested that she was to have some companion with her there, she felt herself compelled to put an end to the conversation. And yet she knew that this was always the way, both with him and with herself. He would say things which would seem to promise that in another minute he would be at her feet, and then he would go no further. And she,

when she heard those words,—though in truth she would have had him at her feet if she could,—would draw away, and recede, and forbid him as it were to go on. But Clara continued to make her comparisons, and knew well that her cousin Will would have gone on in spite of any such forbiddings.

On that night, however, when she was alone, she could console herself with thinking how right she had been. In that front bedroom, the door of which was opposite to her own, with closed shutters, in the terrible solemnity of lifeless humanity, was still lying the body of her aunt! What would she have thought of herself if at such a moment she could have listened to words of love, and promised herself as a wife while such an inmate was in the house? She little knew that he, within that same room had pledged himself, to her who was now lying there waiting for her last removal—had pledged himself, just seven days since, to make the offer which, when he was talking to her, she was always half hoping and half fearing!

He could have meant nothing else when he told her that he had not intended to suggest that she should live there alone in that great house at Perivale. She could not hinder herself from thinking of this, unfit as was the present moment for any such thoughts. How was it possible that she should not speculate on the subject, let her resolutions against any such speculation be ever so strong? She had confessed to herself that she loved the man, and what else could she wish but that he also should love her? But there came upon her some faint suspicion—some glimpse of what was almost a dream—that he might possibly in this matter be guided rather by duty than by love. It might be that he would feel himself constrained to offer his hand to her—constrained by the peculiarity of his position towards her. If so—should she discover that such were his motives—there would be no doubt as to the nature of her answer.

CHAPTER X.

SHOWING HOW CAPTAIN AYLMER KEPT HIS PROMISE.

The next day was necessarily very sad. Clara had declared her determination to follow her aunt to the churchyard, and did so, together with Martha, the old servant. There were three or four mourning coaches, as family friends came over from Taunton, one or two of whom were to be present at the reading of the will. How melancholy was the occasion, and how well the work was done; how substantial and yet how solemn was the luncheon, spread after the funeral for the gentlemen; and how the will was read, without a word of remark,

by Mr. Palmer, need hardly be told here. The will contained certain substantial legacies to servants—the amount to that old handmaid Martha being so great as to produce a fit of fainting, after which the old handmaid declared that if ever there was, by any chance, an angel of light upon the earth, it was her late mistress; and yet Martha had had her troubles with her mistress; and there was a legacy of two hundred pounds to the gentleman who was called upon to act as co-executor with Captain Aylmer. Other clause in the will there was none, except that one substantial clause which bequeathed to her well-beloved nephew, Frederic Folliott Aylmer, everything of which the testatrix died possessed. The will had been made at some moment in which Clara's spirit of independence had offended her aunt, and her name was not mentioned. That nothing should have been left to Clara was the one thing that surprised the relatives from Taunton who were present. The relatives from Taunton, to give them their due, expected nothing for themselves; but as there

had been great doubt as to the proportions in which the property would be divided between the nephew and adopted niece, there was aroused a considerable excitement as to the omission of the name of Miss Amedroz—an excitement which was not altogether unpleasant. When people complain of some cruel shame, which does not affect themselves personally, the complaint is generally accompanied by an unexpressed and unconscious feeling of satisfaction.

On the present occasion, when the will had been read and refolded, Captain Aylmer, who was standing on the rug near the fire, spoke a few words. His aunt, he said, had desired to add a codicil to the will, of the nature of which Mr. Palmer was well aware. She had expressed her intention to leave fifteen hundred pounds to her niece, Miss Amedroz; but death had come upon her too quickly to enable her to perform her purpose. Of this intention on the part of Mrs. Winterfield, Mr. Palmer was as well aware as himself; and he mentioned the subject now, merely with

the object of saying that, as a matter of course, the legacy to Miss Amedroz was as good as though the codicil had been completed. On such a question as that there could arise no question as to legal right; but he understood that the legal claim of Miss Amedroz, under such circumstances, was as valid as his own. It was therefore no affair of generosity on his part. Then there was a little buzz of satisfaction on the part of those present, and the meeting was broken up.

A certain old Mrs. Folliott, who was cousin to everybody concerned, had come over from Taunton to see how things were going. She had always been at variance with Mrs. Winterfield, being a woman who loved cards and supper parties, and who had throughout her life stabled her horses in stalls very different to those used by the lady of Perivale. Now this Mrs. Folliott was the first to tell Clara of the will. Clara, of course, was altogether indifferent. She had known for months past that her aunt had intended to leave nothing to her, and her only hope had

been that she might be left free from any commiseration or remark on the subject. But Mrs. Folliott, with sundry shakings of the head, told her how her aunt had omitted to name her—and then told her also of Captain Aylmer's generosity. "We all did think, my dear," said Mrs. Folliott, "that she would have done better than that for you, or at any rate that she would not have left you dependent on him." Captain Aylmer's horses were also supposed to be stabled in strictly Low Church stalls, and were therefore regarded by Mrs. Folliott with much dislike.

"I and my aunt understood each other perfectly," said Clara.

"I dare say. But if so, you really were the only person that did understand her. No doubt what she did was quite right, seeing that she was a saint; but we sinners would have thought it very wicked to have made such a will, and then to have trusted to the generosity of another person after we were dead."

"But there is no question of trusting to any one's generosity, Mrs. Folliott."

"He need not pay you a shilling, you know, unless he likes it."

"And he will not be asked to pay me a shilling."

"I don't suppose he will go back after what he has said publicly."

"My dear Mrs. Folliott," said Clara earnestly, "pray do not let us talk about it. It is quite unnecessary. I never expected any of my aunt's property, and knew all along that it was to go to Captain Aylmer,—who, indeed, was Mrs. Winterfield's heir naturally. Mrs. Winterfield was not really my aunt, and I had no claim on her."

"But everybody understood that she was to provide for you."

"As I was not one of the everybodies myself, it will not signify." Then Mrs. Folliott retreated, having, as she thought, performed her duty to Clara, and contented herself henceforth with abusing Mrs. Winterfield's will in her own social circles at Taunton.

On the evening of that day, when all the visitors were gone and the house was again

quiet, Captain Aylmer thought it expedient to explain to Clara the nature of his aunt's will, and the manner in which she would be allowed to inherit under it the amount of money which her aunt had intended to bequeath to her. When she became impatient and objected to listen to him, he argued with her, pointing out to her that this was a matter of business to which it was now absolutely necessary that she should attend. "It may be the case," he said, "and, indeed, I hope it will, that no essential difference will be made by it;—except that it will gratify you to know how careful she was of your interests in her last moments. But you are bound in duty to learn your own position; and I, as her executor, am bound to explain it to you. But perhaps you would rather discuss it with Mr. Palmer."

"Oh no;—save me from that."

"You must understand, then, that I shall pay over to you the sum of fifteen hundred pounds as soon as the will has been proved."

"I understand nothing of the kind. I know very well that if I were to take it, I should

be accepting a present from you, and to that I cannot consent."

"But Clara——"

"It is no good, Captain Aylmer. Though I don't pretend to understand much about law, I do know that I can have no claim to anything that is not put into the will; and I won't have what I could not claim. My mind is quite made up, and I hope I mayn't be annoyed about it. Nothing is more disagreeable than having to discuss money matters."

Perhaps Captain Aylmer thought that the having no money matters to discuss might be even more disagreeable. "Well," he said, "I can only ask you to consult any friend whom you can trust upon the matter. Ask your father, or Mr. Belton, and I have no doubt that either of them will tell you that you are as much entitled to the legacy as though it had been written in the will."

"On such a matter, Captain Aylmer, I don't want to ask anybody. You can't pay me the money unless I choose to take it, and I certainly shall not do that." Upon hearing this

he smiled, assuming, as Clara fancied that he was sometimes wont to do, a look of quiet superiority; and then, for that time, he allowed the subject to be dropped between them.

But Clara knew that she must discuss it at length with her father, and the fear of that discussion made her unhappy. She had already written to say that she would return home on the day but one after the funeral, and had told Captain Aylmer of her purpose. So very prudent a man as he of course could not think it right that a young lady should remain with him, in his house, as his visitor; and to her decision on this point he had made no objection. She now heartily wished that she had named the day after the funeral, and that she had not been deterred by her dislike of making a Sunday journey. She dreaded this day, and would have been very thankful if he would have left her and gone back to London. But he intended, he said, to remain at Perivale throughout the next week, and she must endure the day as best she might be able. She

wished that it were possible to ask Mr. Possitt to his accustomed dinner; but she did not dare to make the proposition to the master of the house. Though Captain Aylmer had declared Mr. Possitt to be a very worthy man, Clara surmised that he would not be anxious to commence that practice of a Sabbatical dinner so soon after his aunt's decease. The day, after all, would be but one day, and Clara schooled herself into a resolution to bear it with good humour.

Captain Aylmer had made a positive promise to his aunt on her deathbed that he would ask Clara Amedroz to be his wife, and he had no more idea of breaking his word than he had of resigning the whole property which had been left to him. Whether Clara would accept him he had much doubt. He was a man by no means brilliant, not naturally self-confident, nor was he, perhaps, to be credited with the possession of high principles of the finest sort; but he was clever, in the ordinary sense of the word, knowing his own interest, knowing, too, that that interest de-

pended on other things besides money; and he was a just man, according to the ordinary rules of justice in the world. Not for the first time, when he was sitting by the bedside of his dying aunt, had he thought of asking Clara to marry him. Though he had never hitherto resolved that he would do so—though he had never till then brought himself absolutely to determine that he would take so important a step—he had pondered over it often, and was aware that he was very fond of Clara. He was, in truth, as much in love with her as it was in his nature to be in love. He was not a man to break his heart for a girl;—nor even to make a strong fight for a wife, as Belton was prepared to do. If refused once, he might probably ask again,—having some idea that a first refusal was not always intended to mean much,—and he might possibly make a third attempt, prompted by some further calculation of the same nature. But it might be doubted whether, on the first, second, or third occasion, he would throw much passion into his words; and those who knew him well would hardly

expect to see him die of a broken heart, should he ultimately be unsuccessful.

When he had first thought of marrying Miss Amedroz he had imagined that she would have shared with him his aunt's property, and indeed such had been his belief up to the days of the last illness of Mrs. Winterfield. The match therefore had recommended itself to him as being prudent as well as pleasant; and though his aunt had never hitherto pressed the matter upon him, he had understood what her wishes were. When she first told him, three or four days before her death, that her property was left altogether to him, and then, on hearing how totally her niece was without hope of provision from her father, had expressed her desire to give a sum of money to Clara, she had spoken plainly of her desire;—but she had not on that occasion asked him for any promise. But afterwards, when she knew that she was dying, she had questioned him as to his own feelings, and he, in his anxiety to gratify her in her last wishes, had given her the promise which she was so anxious to hear.

He made no difficulty in doing so. It was his own wish as well as hers. In a money point of view he might no doubt now do better; but then money was not everything. He was very fond of Clara, and felt that if she would accept him he would be proud of his wife. She was well born and well educated, and it was the proper sort of thing for him to do. No doubt he had some idea, seeing how things had now arranged themselves, that he would be giving much more than he would get; and perhaps the manner of his offer might be affected by that consideration; but not on that account did he feel at all sure that he would be accepted. Clara Amedroz was a proud girl,—perhaps too proud. Indeed, it was her fault. If her pride now interfered with her future fortune in life, it should be her own fault, not his. He would do his duty to her and to his aunt;—he would do it perseveringly and kindly; and then, if she refused him, the fault would not be his.

Such, I think, was the state of Captain Aylmer's mind when he got up on the Sunday

morning, resolving that he would on that day make good his promise. And it must be remembered, on his behalf, that he would have prepared himself for his task with more animation if he had hitherto received warmer encouragement. He had felt himself to be repulsed in the little efforts which he had already made to please the lady, and had no idea whatever as to the true state of her feelings. Had he known what she knew, he would, I think, have been animated enough, and gone to his task as happy and thriving a lover as any. But he was a man somewhat diffident of himself, though sufficiently conscious of the value of the worldly advantages which he possessed; —and he was, perhaps, a little afraid of Clara, giving her credit for an intellect superior to his own.

He had promised to walk with her on the Saturday after the reading of the will, intending to take her out through the gardens down to a farm, now belonging to himself, which lay at the back of the town, and which was held by an old widow who had been senior in life to

her late landlady; but no such walk had been possible, as it was dark before the last of the visitors from Taunton had gone. At breakfast on Sunday he again proposed the walk, offering to take her immediately after luncheon. "I suppose you will not go to church?" he said.

"Not to-day. I could hardly bring myself to do it to-day."

"I think you are right. I shall go. A man can always do these things sooner than a lady can. But you will come out afterwards?" To this she assented, and then she was left alone throughout the morning. The walk she did not mind. That she and Captain Aylmer should walk together was all very well. They might probably have done so had Mrs. Winterfield been still alive. It was the long evening afterwards that she dreaded—the long winter evening, in which she would have to sit with him as his guest, and with him only. She could not pass these hours without talking to him, and she felt that she could not talk to him naturally and easily. It would, how-

ever, be but for once, and she would bear it.

They went together down to the house of Mrs. Partridge, the tenant, and made their kindly speeches to the old woman. Mrs. Partridge already knew that Captain Aylmer was to be her landlord, but having hitherto seen more of Miss Amedroz than of the Captain, and having always regarded her landlady's niece as being connected irrevocably with the property, she addressed them as though the estate were a joint affair.

"I shan't be here to trouble you long;—that I shan't, Miss Clara," said the old woman.

"I am sure Captain Aylmer would be very sorry to lose you," replied Clara, speaking loud, and close to the poor woman's ear, for she was deaf.

"I never looked to live after she was gone, Miss Clara;—never. No more I didn't. Deary;—deary! And I suppose you'll be living at the big house now; won't ye?"

"The big house belongs to Captain Aylmer, Mrs. Partridge." She was driven to bawl out

her words, and by no means liked the task. Then Captain Aylmer said something, but his speech was altogether lost.

"Oh;—it belongs to the Captain, do it? They told me that was the way of the will; but I suppose it's all one."

"Yes; it's all one," said Captain Aylmer, gaily.

"It's not exactly all one, as you call it," said Clara, attempting to laugh, but still shouting at the top of her voice.

"Ah;—I don't understand; but I hope you'll both live there together,—and I hope you'll be as good to the poor as she that is gone. Well, well; I didn't ever think that I should be still here, while she is lying under the stones up in the old church!"

Captain Aylmer had determined that he would ask his question on the way back from the farm, and now resolved that he might as well begin with some allusion to Mrs. Partridge's words about the house. The afternoon was bright and cold, and the lane down to the farmhouse had been dried by the wind, so that

the day was pleasant for walking. "We might as well go on to the bridge," he said, as they left the farmyard. "I always think that Perivale church looks better from Creevy bridge than any other point." Perivale church stood high in the centre of the town, on an eminence, and was graced with a spire which was declared by the Perivalians to be preferable to that of Salisbury in proportion, though it was acknowledged to be somewhat inferior to it in height. The little river Creevy, which ran through a portion of the suburbs of the town, and which, as there seen, was hardly more than a ditch, then sloped away behind Creevy Grange, as the farm of Mrs. Partridge was called, and was crossed by a small wooden bridge, from which there was a view, not only of the church, but of all that side of the hill on which Mrs. Winterfield's large brick house stood conspicuously. So they walked down to Creevy bridge, and, when there, stood leaning on the parapet and looking back upon the town.

"How well I know every house and spot

in the place as I see them from here," he said.

"A good many of the houses are your own,—or will be some day; and therefore you should know them."

"I remember, when I used to be here as a boy fishing, I always thought Aunt Winterfield's house was the biggest house in the county."

"It can't be nearly so large as your father's house in Yorkshire."

"No; certainly it is not. Aylmer Park is a large place; but the house does not stretch itself out so wide as that; nor does it stand on the side of a hill so as to show out its proportions with so much ostentation. The coach-house and the stables, and the old brewhouse, seem to come half way down the hill. And when I was a boy I had much more respect for my aunt's red-brick house in Perivale than I had for Aylmer Park."

"And now it's your own."

"Yes; now it's my own,—and all my respect for it is gone. I used to think the

Creevy the best river in England for fish; but I wouldn't give a sixpence now for all the perch I ever caught in it."

"Perhaps your taste for perch is gone also."

"Yes; and my taste for jam. I never believed in the store-room at Aylmer Park as I did in my aunt's store-room here."

"I don't doubt but what it is full now."

"I dare say; but I shall never have the curiosity even to inquire. Ah, dear,—I wish I knew what to do about the house."

"You won't sell it, I suppose?"

"Not if I could either live in it, or let it. It would be wrong to let it stand idle."

"But you need not decide quite at once."

"That's just what I want to do. I want to decide at once."

"Then I'm sure I cannot advise you. It seems to me very unlikely that you should come and live here by yourself. It isn't like a country-house exactly."

"I shan't live there by myself certainly. You heard what Mrs. Partridge said just now."

"What did Mrs. Partridge say?"

"She wanted to know whether it belonged to both of us, and whether it was not all one. Shall it be all one, Clara?"

She was leaning over the rail of the bridge as he spoke, with her eyes fixed on the slowly moving water. When she heard his words, she raised her face and looked full upon him. She was in some sort prepared for the moment, though it would be untrue to say that she had now expected it. Unconsciously she had made some resolve that if ever the question were put to her by him, she would not be taken altogether off her guard; and now that the question was put to her, she was able to maintain her composure. Her first feeling was one of triumph,—as it must be in such a position to any woman who has already acknowledged to herself that she loves the man who then asks her to be his wife. She looked up into Captain Aylmer's face, and his eye almost quailed beneath hers. Even should he be triumphant, he was not perfectly assured that his triumph would be a success.

"Shall what be all one?" she asked.

"Shall it be your house and my house? Can you tell me that you will love me and be my wife?" Again she looked at him, and he repeated his question. "Clara, can you love me well enough to take me for your husband?"

"I can," she said. Why should she hesitate, and play the coy girl, and pretend to any doubts in her mind which did not exist there? She did love him, and had so told herself with much earnestness. To him, while his words had been doubtful, — while he had simply played at making love to her, she had given no hint of the state of her affections. She had so carried herself before him as to make him doubt whether success could be possible for him. But now,— why should she hesitate now? It was as she had hoped,—or as she had hardly dared to hope. He did love her. "I can," she said; and then, before he could speak again, she repeated her words with more emphasis. "Indeed I can; with all my heart."

As regarded herself, she was quite equal to the occasion; but had she known more of the

inner feelings of men and women in general, she would have been slower to show her own. What is there that any man desires,—any man or any woman,—that does not lose half its value when it is found to be easy of access and easy of possession? Wine is valued by its price, not its flavour. Open your doors freely to Jones and Smith, and Jones and Smith will not care to enter them. Shut your doors obdurately against the same gentlemen, and they will use all their little diplomacy to effect an entrance. Captain Aylmer, when he heard the hearty tone of the girl's answer, already began almost to doubt whether it was wise on his part to devote the innermost bin of his cellar to wine that was so cheap.

Not that he had any idea of receding. Principle, if not love, prevented that. "Then the question about the house is decided," he said, giving his hand to Clara as he spoke.

"I don't care a bit about the house now," she answered.

"That's unkind."

"I am thinking so much more of you,—of

you and of myself. What does an old house matter?"

"It's in very good repair," said Captain Aylmer.

"You must not laugh at me," she said; and in truth he was not laughing at her. "What I mean is that anything about a house is indifferent to me now. It is as though I had got all that I want in the world. Is it wrong of me to say so?"

"Oh, dear, no;—not wrong at all. How can it be wrong?" He did not tell her that he also had got all he wanted; but his lack of enthusiasm in this respect did not surprise her, or at first even vex her. She had always known him to be a man careful of his words,—knowing their value,—not speaking with hurried rashness as would her dear Cousin Will. And she doubted whether, after all, such hurried words mean as much as words which are slower and calmer. After all his heat in love and consequent disappointment, Will Belton had left her apparently well contented. His fervour had been short-

lived. She loved her cousin dearly, and was so very glad that his fervour had been short-lived!

"When you asked me, I could but tell you the truth," she said, smiling at him.

The truth is very well, but he would have liked it better had the truth come to him by slower degrees. When his aunt had told him to marry Clara Amedroz, he had been at once reconciled to the order by a feeling on his own part that the conquest of Clara would not be too facile. She was a woman of value, not to be snapped up easily,— or by any one. So he had thought then; but he began to fancy now that he had been wrong in that opinion.

The walk back to the house was not of itself very exciting, though to Clara it was a short period of unalloyed bliss. No doubt had then come upon her to cloud her happiness, and she was "wrapped up in measureless content." It was well that they should both be silent at such a moment. Only yesterday had been buried their dear old friend, — the friend who had brought them together, and been so anxious for their future happiness! And Clara

Amedroz was not a young girl, prone to jump out of her shoes with elation because she had got a lover. She could be steadily happy without many immediate words about her happiness. When they had reached the house, and were once more together in the drawing-room, she again gave him her hand, and was the first to speak. "And you; are you contented?" she asked. Who does not know the smile of triumph with which a girl asks such a question at such a moment as that?

"Contented?—well,—yes; I think I am," he said.

But even those words did not move her to doubt. "If you are," she said, "I am. And now I will leave you till dinner, that you may think over what you have done."

"I had thought about it before, you know," he replied. Then he stooped over her and kissed her. It was the first time he had done so; but his kiss was as cold and proper as though they had been man and wife for years! But it sufficed for her, and she went to her room as happy as a queen.

CHAPTER XI.

MISS AMEDROZ IS TOO CANDID BY HALF.

Clara, when she left her accepted lover in the drawing-room and went up to her own chamber, had two hours for consideration before she would see him again;—and she had two hours for enjoyment. She was very happy. She thoroughly believed in the man who was to be her husband, feeling confident that he possessed those qualities which she thought to be most necessary for her married happiness. She had quizzed him at times, pretending to make it matter of accusation against him that his life was not in truth all that his aunt believed it to be;—but had it been more what Mrs.

Winterfield would have wished, it would have been less to Clara's taste. She liked his position in the world; she liked the feeling that he was a man of influence; perhaps she liked to think that to some extent he was a man of fashion. He was not handsome, but he looked always like a gentleman. He was well educated, given to reading, prudent, steady in his habits, a man likely to rise in the world; and she loved him. I fear the reader by this time may have begun to think that her love should never have been given to such a man. To this accusation I will make no plea at present, but I will ask the complainant whether such men are not always loved. Much is said of the rashness of women in giving away their hearts wildly; but the charge when made generally is, I think, an unjust one. I am more often astonished by the prudence of girls than by their recklessness. A woman of thirty will often love well and not wisely; but the girls of twenty seem to me to like propriety of demeanour, decency of outward life, and a competence. It is, of course, good that it should

be so ; but if it is so, they should not also claim a general character for generous and passionate indiscretion, asserting as their motto that Love shall still be Lord of All. Clara was more than twenty ; but she was not yet so far advanced in age as to have lost her taste for decency of demeanour and propriety of life. A Member of Parliament, with a small house near Eaton Square, with a moderate income, and a liking for committees, who would write a pamphlet once every two years, and read Dante critically during the recess, was, to her, the model for a husband. For such a one she would read his blue books, copy his pamphlets, and learn his translations by heart. She would be safe in the hands of such a man, and would know nothing of the miseries which her brother had encountered. Her model may not appear, when thus described, to be a very noble one ; but I think it is the model most approved among ladies of her class in England.

She made up her mind on various points during those two hours of solitude. In the

first place, she would of course keep her purpose of returning home on the following day. It was not probable that Captain Aylmer would ask her to change it; but let him ask ever so much it must not be changed. She must at once have the pleasure of telling her father that all his trouble about her would now be over; and then, there was the consideration that her further sojourn in the house, with Captain Aylmer as her lover, would hardly be more proper than it would have been had he not occupied that position. And what was she to say if he pressed her as to the time of their marriage? Her aunt's death would of course be a sufficient reason why it should be delayed for some few months; and, upon the whole, she thought it would be best to postpone it till the next session of Parliament should have nearly expired. But she would be prepared to yield to Captain Aylmer, should he name any time after Easter. It was clearly his intention to keep up the house in Perivale as his country residence. She did not like Perivale or the house, but she would say nothing

against such an arrangement. Indeed, with what face could she do so? She was going to bring nothing to the common account,—absolutely nothing but herself! As she thought of this her love grew warmer, and she hardly knew how sufficiently to testify to herself her own gratitude and affection.

She became conscious, as she was preparing herself for dinner, of some special attention to her toilet. She was more than ordinarily careful with her hair, and felt herself to be aware of an anxiety to look her best. She had now been for some time so accustomed to dress herself in black, that in that respect her aunt's death had made no difference to her. Deep mourning had ceased from habit to impress her with any special feeling of funereal solemnity. But something about herself, or in the room, at last struck her with awe, bidding her remember how death had of late been busy among those who had been her dearest and nearest friends; and she sat down, almost frightened at her own heartlessness, in that she was allowing herself to be happy at such

a time. Her aunt had been carried away to her grave only yesterday, and her brother's death had occurred under circumstances of peculiar distress within the year;—and yet she was happy, triumphant,—almost lost in the joy of her own position! She remained for a while in her chair, with her black dress hanging across her lap, as she argued with herself as to her own state of mind. Was it a sign of a hard heart within her, that she could be happy at such a time? Ought the memory of her poor brother to have such an effect upon her as to make any joy of spirits impossible to her? Should she at the present moment be so crushed by her aunt's demise, as to be incapable of congratulating herself upon her own success? Should she have told him, when he asked her that question upon the bridge, that there could be no marrying or giving in marriage between them, no talking on such a subject in days so full of sorrow as these? I do not know that she quite succeeded in recognising it as a truth that sorrow should be allowed to bar out no joy that it does not

bar out of absolute necessity,—by its own weight, without reference to conventional ideas; that sorrow should never, under any circumstances, be nursed into activity, as though it were a thing in itself divine or praiseworthy. I do not know that she followed out her arguments till she had taught herself that it is the Love that is divine,—the Love which, when outraged by death or other severance, produces that sorrow which man would control if he were strong enough, but which he cannot control by reason of the weakness of his humanity. I doubt whether so much as this made itself plain to her, as she sat there before her toilet table, with her sombre dress hanging from her hands on to the ground. But something of the strength of such reasoning was hers. Knowing herself to be full of joy, she would not struggle to make herself believe that it behoved her to be unhappy. She told herself that she was doing what was good for others as well as for herself;—what would be very good for her father, and what should be good, if it might be within her power to make it so,

for him who was to be her husband. The blackness of the cloud of her brother's death would never altogether pass away from her. It had tended, as she knew well, to make her serious, grave, and old, in spite of her own efforts to the contrary. The cloud had been so black with her that it had nearly lost for her the prize which was now her own. But she told herself that that blackness was an injury to her, and not a benefit, and that it had now become a duty to her,—for his sake, if not for her own,—to dispel its shadows rather than encourage them. She would go down to him full of joy, though not full of mirth, and would confess to him frankly, that in receiving the assurance of his love, she had received everything that had seemed to have any value for her in the world. Hitherto she had been independent;—she had specially been careful to show to him her resolve to be independent of him. Now she would put aside all that, and let him know that she recognised in him her lord and master as well as husband. To her father had been left no strength on

which she could lean, and she had been forced therefore to trust to her own strength. Now she would be dependent on him who was to be her husband. As heretofore she had rejected his offers of assistance almost with disdain, so now would she accept them without scruple, looking to him to be her guide in all things, putting from her that carping spirit in which she had been wont to judge of his actions, and believing in him,—as a wife should believe in her husband.

Such were the resolutions which Clara made in the first hour of solitude which came to her after her engagement; and they would have been wise resolutions but for this flaw—that the stronger was submitting itself to the weaker, the greater to the less, the more honest to the less honest, that which was nearly true to that which was in great part false. The theory of man and wife—that special theory in accordance with which the wife is to bend herself in loving submission before her husband, is very beautiful; and would be good altogether if it could only be

arranged that the husband should be the stronger and the greater of the two. The theory is based upon that hypothesis;—and the hypothesis sometimes fails of confirmation. In ordinary marriages the vessel rights itself, and the stronger and the greater takes the lead, whether clothed in petticoats, or in coat, waistcoat, and trousers; but there sometimes comes a terrible shipwreck, when the woman before marriage has filled herself full with ideas of submission, and then finds that her golden-headed god has got an iron body and feet of clay.

Captain Aylmer when he was left alone had also something to think about; and as there were two hours left for such thought before he would again meet Clara, and as he had nothing else with which to occupy himself during those two hours, he again strolled down to the bridge on which he had made his offer. He strolled down there, thinking that he was thinking, but hardly giving much mind to his thoughts, which he allowed to run away with themselves as they listed. Of course he was going to be married. That was a thing

settled. And he was perfectly satisfied with himself in that he had done nothing in a hurry, and could accuse himself of no folly even if he had no great cause for triumph. He had been long thinking that he should like to have Clara Amedroz for his wife;—long thinking that he would ask her to marry him; and having for months indulged such thoughts he could not take blame to himself for having made to his aunt that deathbed promise which she had exacted. At the moment in which she asked him the question he was himself anxious to do the thing she desired of him. How then could he have refused her? And, having given the promise, it was a matter of course with him to fulfil it. He was a man who would have never respected himself again —would have hated himself for ever, had he failed to keep a promise from which no living being could absolve him. He had been right therefore to make the promise, and having made it, had been right to keep it, and to do the thing at once. And Clara was very good and very wise, and sometimes looked very well,

and would never disgrace him; and as she was in worldly matters to receive much and give nothing, she would probably be willing to make herself amenable to any arrangements as to their future mode of life which he might propose. In respect of this matter he was probably thinking of lodgings for himself in London during the parliamentary session, while she remained alone in the big red house upon which his eyes were fixed at the time. There was much of convenience in all this, which might perhaps atone to him for the sacrifice which he was undoubtedly making of himself. Had marriage simply been of itself a thing desirable, he could doubtless have disposed of himself to better advantage. His prospects, present fortune, and general position were so favourable, that he might have dared to lift his expectations, in regard both to wealth and rank, very high. The Aylmers were a considerable people, and he, though a younger brother, had much more than a younger brother's portion. His seat in Parliament was safe; his position in society

was excellent and secure; he was exactly so placed that marriage with a fortune was the only thing wanting to put the finishing coping-stone to his edifice;—that, and perhaps also the useful glory of having some Lady Mary or Lady Emily at the top of his table. Lady Emily Aylmer? Yes;—it would have sounded better, and there was a certain Lady Emily who might have suited. Now, as some slight regrets stole upon him gently, he failed to remember that this Lady Emily had not a shilling in the world.

Yes; some faint regrets did steal upon him, though he went on telling himself that he had acted rightly. His stars, which were generally very good to him, had not perhaps on this occasion been as good as usual. No doubt he had to a certain degree become encumbered with Clara Amedroz. Had not the direct and immediate leap with which she had come into his arms shown him somewhat too plainly that one word of his mouth tending towards matrimony had been regarded by her as being too valuable to be lost? The fruit that falls

easily from the tree, though it is ever the best, is never valued by the gardener. Let him have well-nigh broken his neck in gathering it, unripe and crude, from the small topmost boughs of the branching tree, and the pippin will be esteemed by him as invaluable. On that morning, as Captain Aylmer had walked home from church, he had doubted much what would be Clara's answer to him. Then the pippin was at the end of the dangerous bough. Now it had fallen to his feet, and he did not scruple to tell himself that it was his, and always might have been his as a matter of course. Well, the apple had come of a good kind, and, though there might be specks upon it, though it might not be fit for any special glory of show or pride of place among the dessert service, still it should be garnered and used, and no doubt would be a very good apple for eating. Having so concluded, Captain Aylmer returned to the house, washed his hands, changed his boots, and went down to the drawing-room just as dinner was ready.

She came up to him almost radiant with joy,

and put her hand upon his arm. "Martha did not know but what you were here," she said, "and told them to put dinner on the table."

"I hope I have not kept you waiting."

"Oh, dear, no. And what if you did? Ladies never care about things getting cold. It is gentlemen only who have feelings in such matters as that."

"I don't know that there is much difference; but, however—" Then they were in the dining-room, and as the servant remained there during dinner, there was nothing in their conversation worth repeating. After dinner they still remained down stairs, seating themselves on the two sides of the fire, Clara having fully resolved that she would not on such an evening as this leave Captain Aylmer to drink his glass of port wine by himself.

"I suppose I may stay with you, mayn't I?" she said.

"Oh, dear, yes; I'm sure I'm very much obliged. I'm not at all wedded to solitude." Then there was a slight pause.

"That's lucky," she said, "as you have

made up your mind to be wedded in another sort of way." Her voice as she spoke was very low, but there was a gentle ring of restrained joyousness in it which ought to have gone at once to his heart and made him supremely blessed for the time.

"Well,—yes," he answered. "We are in for it now, both of us;—are we not? I hope you have no misgivings about it, Clara."

"Who? I? I have misgivings! No, indeed. I have no misgivings, Frederic; no doubts, no scruples, no alloy in my happiness. With me it is all as I would have it be. Ah; you haven't understood why it has been that I have seemed to be harsh to you when we have met."

"No, I have not," said he. This was true; but it is true also that it would have been well that he should be kept in his ignorance. She was minded, however, to tell him everything, and therefore she went on.

"I don't know how to tell you; and yet, circumstanced as we are now, it seems that I ought to tell you everything."

"Yes, certainly; I think that," said Aylmer. He was one of those men who consider themselves entitled to see, hear, and know every little detail of a woman's conduct, as a consequence of the circumstances of his engagement, and who consider themselves shorn of their privilege if anything be kept back. If any gentleman had said a soft word to Clara eight years ago, that soft word ought to be repeated to him now. I am afraid that these particular gentlemen sometimes hear some fibs; and I often wonder that their own early passages in the tournays of love do not warn them that it must be so. When James has sat deliciously through all the moonlit night with his arm round Mary's waist, and afterwards sees Mary led to the altar by John, does it not occur to him that some John may have also sat with his arm round Anna's waist, —that Anna whom he is leading to the altar? These things should not be inquired into too curiously; but the curiosity of some men on such matters has no end. For the most part, women like telling,—only they do not choose

to be pressed beyond their own modes of utterance. "I should like to know that I have your full confidence," said he.

"You have got my full confidence," she replied.

"I mean that you should tell me anything that there is to be told."

"It was only this, that I had learned to love you before I thought that my love would be returned."

"Oh;—was that it?" said Captain Aylmer, in a tone which seemed to imply something like disappointment.

"Yes, Fred; that was it. And how could I, under such circumstances, trust myself to be gentle with you, or to look to you for assistance? How could I guess then all that I know now?"

"Of course you couldn't."

"And therefore I was driven to be harsh. My aunt used to speak to me about it."

"I don't wonder at that, for she was very anxious that we should be married."

Clara for a moment felt herself to be un-

comfortable as she heard these words, half perceiving that they implied some instigation on the part of Mrs. Winterfield. Could it be that Captain Aylmer's offer had been made in obedience to a promise? "Did you know of her anxiety?" she asked.

"Well;—yes; that is to say, I guessed it. It was natural enough that the same idea should come to her and to me too. Of course, seeing us so much thrown together, she could not but think of our being married as a chance upon the cards."

"She used to tell me that I was harsh to you;—abrupt, she called it. But what could I do? I'll tell you, Fred, how I first found out that I really cared for you. What I tell you now is of course a secret; and I should speak of it to no one under any circumstances but those which unite us two together. My cousin Will, when he was at Belton, made me an offer."

"He did, did he? You did not tell me that when you were saying all those fine things in his praise in the railway carriage."

"Of course I did not. Why should I? I wasn't bound to tell you my secrets then, sir."

"But he did absolutely offer to you?"

"Is there anything so wonderful in that? But, wonderful or not, he did."

"And you refused him?"

"I refused him certainly."

"It wouldn't have been a bad match, if all that you say about his property is true."

"If you come to that, it would have been a very good match; and perhaps you think I was silly to decline it?"

"I don't say that."

"Papa thought so;—but, then, I couldn't tell papa the whole truth, as I can tell it to you now, Captain Aylmer. I couldn't tell dear papa that my heart was not my own to give to my cousin Will; nor could I give Will any such reason. Poor Will! I could only say to him bluntly that I wouldn't have him."

"And you would, if it hadn't been,—hadn't been—for me."

"Nay, Fred; there you tax me too far.

What might have come of my heart if you hadn't fallen in my way, who can say? I love Will Belton dearly, and hope that you may do so——"

"I must see him first."

"Of course;—but, as I was saying, I doubt whether, under any circumstances, he would have been the man I should have chosen for a husband. But as it was,—it was impossible. Now you know it all, and I think that I have been very frank with you."

"Oh! very frank." He would not take her little jokes, nor understand her little prettinesses. That he was a man not prone to joking she knew well, but still it went against the grain with her to find that he was so very hard in his replies to her attempts.

It was not easy for Clara to carry on the conversation after this, so she proposed that they should go up-stairs into the drawing-room. Such a change even as that would throw them into a different way of talking, and prevent the necessity of any further immediate allusion to Will Belton. For Clara was aware, though

she hardly knew why, that her frankness to her future husband had hardly been successful, and she regretted that she had on this occasion mentioned her cousin's name. They went upstairs and again sat themselves in chairs over the fire; but for a while conversation did not seem to come to them freely. Clara felt that it was now Captain Aylmer's turn to begin, and Captain Aylmer felt—that he wished he could read the newspaper. He had nothing in particular that he desired to say to his lady-love. That morning, as he was shaving himself, he had something to say that was very particular, —as to which he was at that moment so nervous, that he had cut himself slightly through the trembling of his hand. But that had now been said, and he was nervous no longer. That had now been said, and the thing settled so easily, that he wondered at his own nervousness. He did not know that there was anything that required much further immediate speech. Clara had thought somewhat of the time which might be proposed for their marriage, making some little resolves, with which the reader is

already acquainted; but no ideas of this kind presented themselves to Captain Aylmer. He had asked his cousin to be his wife, thereby making good his promise to his aunt. There could be no further necessity for pressing haste. Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof.

It is not to be supposed that the thriving lover actually spoke to himself in such language as that,—or that he confessed to himself that Clara Amedroz was an evil to him rather than a blessing. But his feelings were already so far tending in that direction, that he was by no means disposed to make any further promise, or to engage himself in closer connection with matrimony by the mention of any special day. Clara, finding that her companion would not talk without encouragement from her, had to begin again, and asked all those natural questions about his family, his brother, his sister, his home habits, and the old house in Yorkshire, the answers to which must be so full of interest to her. But even on these subjects he was dry, and indisposed to answer with the full copiousness of free communication

which she desired. And at last there came a question and an answer,—a word or two on one side, and then a word or two on the other, from which Clara got a wound which was very sore to her.

"I have always pictured to myself," she said, "your mother as a woman who has been very handsome."

"She is still a handsome woman, though she is over sixty."

"Tall, I suppose?"

"Yes, tall, and with something of—of—what shall I say—dignity, about her."

"She is not grand, I hope?"

"I don't know what you call grand."

"Not grand in a bad sense;—I'm sure she is not that. But there are some ladies who seem to stand so high above the level of ordinary females as to make us who are ordinary quite afraid of them."

"My mother is certainly not ordinary," said Captain Aylmer.

"And I am," said Clara, laughing. "I wonder what she'll say to me,—or, rather,

what she will think of me." Then there was a moment's silence, after which Clara, still laughing, went on. "I see, Fred, that you have not a word of encouragement to give me about your mother."

"She is rather particular," said Captain Aylmer.

Then Clara drew herself up, and ceased to laugh. She had called herself ordinary with that half-insincere depreciation of self which is common to all of us when we speak of our own attributes, but which we by no means intend that they who hear us shall accept as strictly true, or shall re-echo as their own approved opinions. But in this instance Captain Aylmer, though he had not quite done that, had done almost as bad.

"Then I suppose I had better keep out of her way," said Clara, by no means laughing as she spoke.

"Of course when we are married you must go and see her."

"You do not, at any rate, promise me a very agreeable visit, Fred. But I dare say I

shall survive it. After all, it is you that I am to marry, and not your mother; and as long as you are not majestic to me, I need not care for her majesty."

"I don't know what you mean by majesty."

"You must confess that you speak of her as of something very terrible."

"I say that she is particular;—and so she is. And as my respect for her opinion is equal to my affection for her person, I hope that you will make a great effort to gain her esteem."

"I never make any efforts of that kind. If esteem doesn't come without efforts it isn't worth having."

"There I disagree with you altogether;—but I especially disagree with you as you are speaking about my mother, and about a lady who is to become your own mother-in-law. I trust that you will make such efforts, and that you will make them successfully. Lady Aylmer is not a woman who will give you her heart at once, simply because you have become her son's wife. She will judge you by your

own qualities, and will not scruple to condemn you should she see cause."

Then there was a longer silence, and Clara's heart was almost in rebellion even on this, the first day of her engagement. But she quelled her high spirit, and said no further word about Lady Aylmer. Nor did she speak again till she had enabled herself to smile as she spoke.

"Well, Fred," she said, putting her hand upon his arm, "I'll do my best, and woman can do no more. And now I'll say good night, for I must pack for to-morrow's journey before I go to bed." Then he kissed her,—with a cold, chilling kiss,—and she left him for the night.

END OF VOL. I.

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v. 1